

The Partially Sighted Society



CATARACTS

Cataracts are a very common and treatable eye condition. As we age the lens inside our eye gradually changes and becomes opaque making things look misty or cloudy. When this happens it is called a Cataract. The good news about cataracts is that a straightforward operation can usually remove this misty lens and replace it with an artificial lens which will enable you to see more clearly again.

How does a cataract affect my vision?

The eye needs light in order to see. This is because the eye functions much like a camera. Light rays enter through the front of the eye, passing through the cornea, the pupil and the aqueous humour (the transparent fluid in the front of the eye) and then through the lens. The lens is clear so that light can pass directly through to focus on your retina. Light sensitive cells on the retina convert the light into electrical signals. These signals are then sent to the optic nerve and the brain process the images and we are able to 'see'.

A cataract occurs when the cells of the lens begin to change. These changes cause the lens to become cloudy instead of clear. This means light cannot pass directly through the lens onto the retina and this is when you may begin to notice some changes in your vision. Car headlights may begin to dazzle; bright lights may appear overly bright and 'glarey'. Other symptoms may include a feeling that your vision has become misty or cloudy – a bit like looking through dirty glasses (if you wear them) or a dirty window. Reading small print may become more difficult and you may find you need more light in order to see fine detail.

If you notice any of these symptoms it would be advisable to see an optometrist who will examine your eyes and tell you whether or not you have a cataract. This would be a good time to discuss with the optometrist how much the cataract is affecting your vision. Your optometrist will then be able to refer you to your GP who will refer you to your local eye clinic.

What causes cataracts?

In general cataracts occur as we become older, however other factors that may increase the risk of developing cataracts include:

- **Diabetes**
- **Extensive exposure to sunlight**
- **Long-term use of steroid medication**
- **Smoking**
- **Obesity**
- **High blood pressure**
- **Previous eye injury or inflammation in the eye**
- **Previous eye surgery**
- **Family history of cataracts**
- **Excessive alcohol consumption**

How is a cataract treated?

The only treatment for a cataract is to remove the cloudy lens and replace it with an artificial lens implant. This is done by an eye specialist (Ophthalmologist) at the hospital. A cataract operation can be performed at any stage and there is no need to wait until the cataract is “ripe” as is often thought. Surgery is usually performed when the cataract has got to a stage where it is beginning to affect your vision and daily life. For many people this is when they feel it is beginning to interfere with their ability to see clearly when driving. It is important to communicate this when you see the eye specialist.

The surgery to remove a cataract is usually conducted on an outpatient basis. Cataract surgery is one of the most common and quickest operations performed, and many people are able to return to their usual daily routine after 24 hours.

Will I need new spectacles after the operation?

It is usual to have your spectacle prescription updated after a cataract operation as there is no focusing power in the plastic lens.

Can cataracts be prevented?

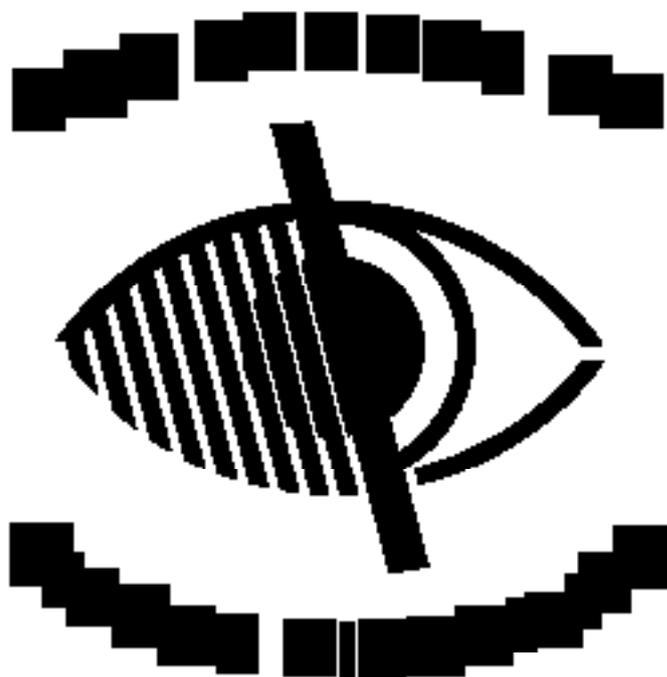
Because the exact cause of cataracts is uncertain, there is no proven method of preventing them. As they are so common in older adults, however, it's important to have your eyes examined on a regular basis. If you are over 60 or have a history of eye problems or other medical conditions such as diabetes, you should have your eyes tested every year.

Being diagnosed with any type of eye condition is distressing. At the Partially Sighted Society we have trained professionals on hand to offer help, support, advice and training in the use of visual and non-visual aids.

For more information contact the Partially Sighted Society.

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