

Cataracts

A plain-English guide for you and your family

WHAT IS HAPPENING

A cataract happens when the lens inside your eye—the clear disk that focuses light onto the back of your eye—becomes cloudy. Think of it like a clear glass window that slowly gets frosted or dirty; light can still get through, but it scatters and blurs instead of passing cleanly. Most cataracts build up over years as proteins in the lens clump together. You might notice colors seem duller, glare from headlights bothers you at night, or you need brighter light to read. Cataracts are very common as people age—more than half of Americans over 80 have them or have had surgery to remove them. The good news is that cataract surgery is one of the safest and most successful surgeries we do; the cloudy lens is taken out and replaced with a clear artificial one, and most people see clearly again within days. If you notice vision changes, talk with your eye doctor so you can plan the right time for treatment.

What you might feel

- Cloudy or blurry vision that gets worse over time
- Colors look faded, yellowed, or less bright
- Glare or halos around lights, especially at night
- Trouble seeing at night or in dim light
- Double vision in one eye (monocular diplopia)
- Frequent changes in eyeglass or contact lens prescription
- Sudden improvement in near vision in older adults (second sight)
- A white or gray spot visible in the pupil (advanced cataract)

Call the doctor right away if...

- Sudden, painful loss of vision (may signal acute angle-closure glaucoma, retinal detachment, or infection rather than simple cataract)
- Red, painful eye with cloudy cornea (suggests acute glaucoma or infection, not cataract alone)

- New floaters, flashes of light, or a curtain over part of vision (possible retinal tear or detachment, especially after cataract surgery)
- Vision loss in an infant or young child (congenital cataract can cause permanent vision loss if not treated early)
- Rapidly worsening cataract in one eye only (may indicate trauma, inflammation, or another eye disease)

What the care team will do

- Assess how much the vision loss affects daily safety and independence, including reading, driving, walking, and self-care tasks.
- Check for signs of urgent eye problems like pain, redness, flashing lights, or sudden vision changes, and report these to the provider immediately.
- Teach the patient about fall prevention at home, including using bright lights, removing tripping hazards, and using handrails.
- Educate the patient that cataract surgery is very common, safe, and usually done as outpatient same-day surgery with a short recovery.
- Review all current medications, especially steroids and diabetes medicines, and reinforce the importance of controlling blood sugar if the patient has diabetes.

Where this information comes from

- American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO) Preferred Practice Pattern
- National Eye Institute (NEI)
- Cochrane Eyes and Vision
- American Optometric Association (AOA)

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