

Cataracts: Inevitable or avoidable?

The lens of the eye focuses light from objects onto the retina. The lens pushes the old focusing fibers into the center, causing haziness or a film. Because the lens has neither nerves nor blood vessels, it depends on the internal flow of fluid inside the eye (aqueous humor) to provide oxygen and nutrients and to remove toxic products.

The lens focuses light constantly, from distant objects to near objects. Some of the light wavelengths, such as ultraviolet light, are especially toxic. UV light creates more free radicals, which will accelerate the clouding of the lens over the years. Any clouding of the lens is a cataract (not cataracts). A cataract may be central (called nuclear), peripheral (on younger fibers near the outer edge of the lens) or sub-capsular (at the very front or very back of the lens).

The No. 1 cause of blindness in the world is cataracts, and it is preventable as well as treatable.

Symptoms of cataracts include hazy vision, glare, difficulty focusing on the printed page, rapid eye fatigue, even double vision. Some people will develop second sight, meaning that as they grow older they may see better without their glasses because the cataract is actually changing the prescription of the eye. Always check to see if your glasses can be improved.

We're led to believe that everyone will develop cataracts. That is not true. We also are told that once you have them they get worse. That usually is true but only because people continue the same lifestyle and habits that led to the formation of cataracts in the first place. However, you can use nutrition and lifestyle changes to stop and even reverse cataracts.

Ask your eye doctor if he or she has ever seen a patient whose cataracts have stopped. I know they have. Yet doctors often tell people nothing will stop cataracts. This often is not true.

Let's take a look at the causes and treatment of cataracts.

- Sunlight, especially UV light, is a major cause, especially if your body has a low antioxidant bank account. So ask for UV blockers in your sunglasses and also in your glasses.
- Dehydration can hasten the development of cataracts. Drink six to eight glasses of water per day to combat this. Sodas, iced tea and coffee do not fulfill this requirement.
- Keep alcohol use to moderate amounts of red or white wine.
- Heredity and age also are factors but ones that we cannot do much about except to focus on other lifestyle changes.
- Smoking and secondhand smoke are known factors of many ailments. This is beyond argument. STOP smoking and avoid smoky environments.
- Obesity has been identified in recent studies as a factor in the development of cataracts. Develop a diet and exercise program to combat obesity. Limit sugar intake, eat lots of raw vegetables and salads, and drink lots of water to satisfy your hunger.
- Diabetes, heart disease, hypertension and arthritis, and the medications that go with them, can contribute to the formation of cataracts. For example, cholesterol-lowering drugs frequently speed up the formation of cataracts by

virtue of their effect on the liver. Cortisone, used in arthritis and lung disease treatment, also will create cataracts with long-term use. Ask your doctor if your dose can be decreased or eliminated, or if there are any other natural means of controlling or treating these conditions.

- There are more than 300 commonly prescribed medications that speed up cataract formation when coupled with sunlight exposure. Ask your pharmacist about your medication. Wear your sunglasses to eliminate this possibility so you don't have to discontinue necessary medications.
- Estrogen apparently has a protective effect. Studies show women are almost twice as likely as men to develop cataracts after the age of 50. We are still waiting for a better designer estrogen that can give us the good effects without increasing the chance of breast or uterine cancer.
- Protect against injuries at home, play or in the workplace. Remember children's safety and select their toys wisely.

Symptoms, not just the physician's judgment alone, should determine whether cataract surgery is necessary. You need a good examination with a refraction. Remember that the refraction is not paid for under many medical insurance policies, but it is the only way to learn if glasses will improve your vision. I have found that nine out of 10 people can be improved at distance or near. Sometimes that is not enough and surgery is necessary.

If you do have to have surgery, modern cataract surgical procedures are excellent. Eye drops are used as anesthetics and stitches are rarely needed. Surgery is performed with high-speed sound. We do not do surgery with a laser yet, but we do use a laser to open an after-cataract membrane. In 20 to 30 percent of cases this membrane will develop over the years.

Surgery, however, is not the only remedy, especially if your only problem is glare around headlights at night. I have found some of these other items very useful:

- Diet and exercise: All new adventures in health start with diet and exercise. Drink plenty of water; engage in 30 minutes of exercise a day; reduce the bad fats, alcohol, smoking, refined sugars and antacids.
- Supplements: I recommend a **multivitamin** with lutein twice daily, and a **B complex** (such as B 50) is useful. Also useful is an essential fatty acid, such as **DHA 500 mg** taken twice daily with meals, unless you are on blood thinners. Vitamin A probably is in your **multivitamin**, but additional **vitamin E** may be necessary to bring you up to 400 to 800 IU a day. **Vitamin C** is an important antioxidant in the lens and should be supplemented by at least 1,000 mg a day.
- Sulfur: Glutathione is a major antioxidant in the lens. It can be augmented by eating sulfur-containing foods such as onions, avocados, eggs, asparagus or garlic. **N-acetyl cysteine (NAC)** contains sulfur. **NAC** can be used as a supplement but occurs naturally in red meat (organic, preferably). Six hundred mg of **NAC** once or twice a day is an excellent glutathione booster, as is **alpha lipoic acid** and **MSM (methylsulfonylmethane)**. Even wine has sulfur, which is used as a natural control of fermentation. It soon may be shown that wine decreases the incidence of cataracts as well as macular degeneration.
- **Quercetin**: A bioflavonoid found in red onions and other fruits and vegetables, quercetin is able to stop cataracts induced by diabetes, cortisone or radiation in laboratory animals. Therefore, it should be added to your diet. **Turmeric**, a common kitchen spice, has been used in Asia to prevent cataracts.
- Drug inventory: Check your medications and go over them with your pharmacist to

see if any of them are photosensitizing drugs.

- Get enough sleep: Nighttime (darkness) is when your eyes get a chance to rest and to heal. They have been bombarded by light and the formation of free radicals all day, and this is the opportunity for the liver and other parts of the body to send the necessary antioxidants and minerals to replenish the tissues of the eyes.

A number of experimental options are being evaluated because the cataract epidemic is global. Pyruvate, a substance produced by the breakdown of glucose, and several Indian herbs are receiving much interest. As soon as there is clinical information about safety and usefulness for cataract treatment, it will appear on this site.

Find a way to check your own vision in your house or in your yard or by reading and then check it periodically. Do not take medications if not necessary. If your only problem is a decrease in night vision, try **bilberry**, 100 mg in the evening before dark. Or, if you are not diabetic, eat fresh or frozen blueberries. And, by the way, keep using your eyes.

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