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Cataract

A cataract is a loss of transparency, or clouding, of the normally clear lens of the eye. As one ages, chemical changes occur in the lens that make it less transparent. The loss of transparency may be so mild that vision is hardly affected, or so severe that no shapes or movements are seen. When the lens gets cloudy enough to obstruct vision to any significant degree, it is called a cataract. Glasses or contact lenses cannot sharpen your vision to normal if a cataract is present.

The most common cause of cataract is aging. Other causes include trauma, medications such as steroids, systemic diseases such as diabetes and genetic factors. Occasionally, babies are born with a cataract.

Reducing the amount of ultraviolet light exposure by wearing a wide-brim hat and sunglasses may reduce your risk for developing a cataract but once developed there is no cure except to have the cataract surgically removed. Outpatient surgical procedures can remove the cataract through either a small incision (phacoemulsification) or a large incision (extracapsular extraction). The time to have the surgical procedure is when your vision is bad enough that it interferes with your lifestyle.

Cataract surgery is a very successful operation. One and a half million people have this procedure every year and 95% have a successful result. As with any surgical procedure, complications can occur during or after surgery and some are severe enough to limit vision. But in most cases, vision, as well as quality of life, improves.