



Medical Director - Michael A. Hecht, O.D

# I Have a Cataract. Now What?

*You have just had your annual eye exam and the doctor has informed you that you have a cataract in both eyes. Now what?*

Don't panic. Most of us, if we live long enough, may develop some form of cataract. A cataract is just the clouding of the normally clear crystalline lens in our eyes. The lens helps us focus and see clearly. With age, our normally clear lenses get cloudy. It is only when the cloudiness interferes with our normal daily activities that we need to be concerned and have the cataract removed, and cataracts do not always require surgery.

Cataracts normally take years to develop, but they can progress to the point that you no longer see people and things. Most people with cataracts don't realize how cloudy their vision has become. In fact, before surgery, many patients say they did not realize that their cataracts interfered with their daily activities.

After cataract surgery, patients report that what they see is brighter, clearer and more colorful. And the surgery also can be of help to younger people: Although the need for surgery tends to peak in our 60s and 70s, cataracts can develop at any age. By age 80, more than half of all Americans either have a cataract or have had cataract surgery, according to the

National Eye Institute.

The decision to have a cataract taken out should be based on whether it's limiting your vision and quality of life. For people in certain occupations, such as an accountant or a truck driver, even a little blurriness interferes with what they do on a daily basis, while other people may be happy to wait because they are satisfied with how well they can see.

Cataract surgery is not painful. After sedating you, the doctor will typically numb your eye with eye drops, make a small incision through which the cataract can be broken up with ultrasound, and replace the clouded lens with an artificial lens or intraocular lens implant. Most people report that their cataract surgery was easier than they had expected and typically say that dental procedures were more uncomfortable.

Cataracts are a natural part of aging; however, you can protect your eyes by always wearing sunglasses when you're out in the sun. Chronic ultraviolet radiation exposure can help cataracts grow faster. Also, some data suggests that nutritional supplements

containing zinc, lutein, and zeaxanthin — such as those formulated to lower the risk for macular degeneration — may also help slow cataract growth. The evidence is mixed, but there's little risk and it may help.

Cataract surgery is not the surgery that our grandparents and even parents remember. Cataract surgery today is a common outpatient procedure, most often performed with numbing eye drops, and most patients see clearly within days to a couple of weeks.

Remember, not everyone with a cataract has to have cataract surgery. Nearly half the population will never have or need cataract surgery. As long as our vision is correctable with glasses and our lifestyle is not affected, we may never have to worry about cataract surgery.

- Michael A. Hecht, O.D. is the Medical Director and Director of Provider Relations of Premier Eye Care, a leading third-party administrator of eye care benefits for health plans. More information about Premier is available at [premiereyecare.net](http://premiereyecare.net).

