Health Hints

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Misconceptions about Cataracts

Improvements in medicine

With time have come a number of discoveries and improvements in understanding and treating cataracts. Still, some hold to old notions and others to newly conceived notions about cataracts. Let's address any misconceptions right away…

Misconception: A cataract is a growth or film over the eye.

Truth: A cataract is a clouding of the eye's natural lens – the part of the eye that focuses light onto the retina at the back of the eye and adjusts the eye's focus, letting us see things clearly both up close and far away.[1]

"The lens is mostly made of water and protein. The protein is arranged in a precise way that keeps the lens clear and lets light pass through it. But as we age, some of the protein may clump together and start to cloud a small area of the lens."[2] This is a cataract – a lens that has been clouded.[2,3] "Over time, the cataract may grow larger and cloud more of the lens, making it harder to see."[2] Sometimes, the clear lens slowly changes to a yellowish/brownish color, adding a brownish tint to vision.[2] Still, "no one knows what causes the build-up of protein responsible for clouding the lens."[3]

Misconception: Both eyes are usually affected by cataracts.

Truth: A cataract can occur in one or both eyes.[2] A cataract may be mild in one eye and develop at a denser rate in the other eye. A cataract may obstruct vision in one eye, while you may never develop a cataract in the second eye.

Misconception: A cataract can spread from one eye to the other.

Truth: A cataract **cannot** spread from one eye to another.[2] It is not an infection or virus that can spread.

Misconception: A cataract leads to immediate loss of vision.

Truth: Most cataracts form slowly.[4] If the cloudiness in the eye is not near the center of the lens, you may not even be aware that a cataract is present. How quickly a cataract develops and progresses varies among individuals and may even be different between the two eyes.[5] Eventually, cataracts *do* impair vision and can lead to blindness if treatment is not sought. "Cataracts do not go away with time or medication."[6]

Misconception: Cataracts are painful.

Truth: Cataracts do not cause pain.[4,7] A cataract does not cause itching, redness, or discharge from the eye.[7] If you have eye pain, it is likely due to another source/ medical condition.

Misconception: A cataract always requires surgery.

Truth: If a cataract is not obstructing your vision or impairing your vision in a way that makes you unable to perform daily tasks, you likely don't need cataract surgery. Changing your eyeglass prescription, using strong bifocals, magnification, or appropriate lighting may help to improve your vision for a while.[1,8] Cataracts need to be removed when they interfere with your everyday activities, like driving, reading, cooking, etc. You do not have to rush into surgery. In most cases, delaying cataract surgery will not cause long-term damage to your eye or make eye surgery more difficult.[2] Occasionally, if a cataract is interfering with the ability to examine or treat another eye problem (e.g., macular degeneration or diabetic retinopathy), it will need to be removed before it obstructs vision.[2] Cataract removal can also be critical in infants and children so that normal visual development can occur.[9] Note: The information in this newsletter primarily addresses age-related cataracts. If you suspect a cataract in your child, see your eye doctor immediately, and you can read here for more information on cataracts in children. Cataracts

may be treated differently among infants and children than in adults.

Misconception: A cataract needs to "ripen" before surgery can be performed.

Truth: In the past, eye specialists often waited until a cataract became "ripe" and vision was very poor before suggesting a cataract be removed. With modern surgery, however, it is no longer necessary for a cataract to become "ripe" before removing it. Cataracts are now typically removed as soon as they interfere with daily activities.[5, 10]

Misconception: A cataract can be removed with laser surgery.

Truth: Cataracts simply **cannot** be removed with laser surgery.[11] Although some corrections in vision can be made with lasers (such as LASIK eye surgery), cataracts require the removal of the clouded lens through a surgical incision. In most cases, the lens is then replaced with a permanent intraocular lens (IOL) implant.[8] Occasionally, a laser procedure, known as a posterior capsulotomy, will be needed in the months or years after cataract surgery.[8] This procedure is needed if the capsule behind (posterior) the new lens (IOL) becomes cloudy or wrinkled and interferes with vision. In this procedure, the ophthalmologist can use laser surgery to make an opening in the center of the posterior capsule to restore normal vision; it is not necessary to remove the entire posterior capsule.[12]

Misconception: The eye is taken out of its socket during surgery.

Truth: Sometimes when faced with a decision about surgery, people will fear the worst possible scenario. "We want to assure you that your eye is not taken out of its socket during surgery."[10]

Misconception: To remove cataracts, both eyes are operated on at the same time.

Truth: Typically, both eyes are not operated on at the same time. If you have cataracts in both eyes, the worse eye is usually operated on first.[11] The second eye can usually be operated on after the first eye has a chance to stabilize, usually about 4–8 weeks later.[2]

Misconception: Scientists and doctors know exactly what causes cataracts.

Truth: Unfortunately, no one knows exactly why cataracts develop. We do know, however, that some things (controllable and uncontrollable) put you at higher risk for cataracts, including:

- age;
- family history;
- medical problems, such as diabetes;
- injury to the eye;
- medications, especially steroids, but also possibly diuretics and major tranquilizers;
- radiation;
- long-term, unprotected exposure to sunlight;
- previous eye surgery;
- smoking;
- heavy alcohol consumption;
- air pollution;
- premature birth; and
- high salt intake.[1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 13]

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