

CATARACT FACTSHEET

Q What are cataracts?

A Cataracts are cloudy patches that develop on the lens of the eye. They start out very small and initially cause very little change to vision. Over time, these patches become bigger and the vision can become noticeably blurred or misty, eventually making the eyesight very poor. They can cause blindness if left untreated.

Q How common are cataracts?

A Cataracts are rare before the age of 40 but increase rapidly after the age of 55 and are very common over the age of 65. 10% of people aged 65 or over have had cataract surgery.

Q Am I more likely to get cataract than someone without thalidomide damage?

A Based on the data collected at HNAs, the rate of cataracts in beneficiaries does not seem to be any higher than in the general population of the same age.

Q When should I check things out?

A You should see an optician if you have any of these symptoms:

- your eyesight is blurred or misty
- you find lights too bright or glaring, or there are halos around lights
- you find it harder to see in low light
- colours look faded or odd
- the lenses in your glasses feel like they are dirty and need cleaning, even when they don't.

Cataracts don't always need operating on straight away - the optician might suggest a change in your prescription or regular check-ups to see how your vision is changing.

If you drive, it is particularly important to keep up with regular optician checks as, if left without monitoring a cataract can reduce the vision to the point where you are not safe to drive.

Even if you don't have any symptoms, it is recommended to have a check with your optician every two years.

Q What happens in cataract surgery?

A 95% of cataract surgery is done with local anaesthetic. This is usually just drops but sometimes the anaesthetist will use an injection to keep the muscles of the eye still as well.

The front of the eye is made numb with anaesthetic and the lids are held open with a special instrument, so you can't blink.

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The surgeon makes a tiny cut at edge of the iris (the coloured part of the eye). The cloudy lens is removed and replaced with a synthetic clear lens. The procedure is very quick and takes less than 30 minutes in most cases - many take as little as 10 minutes but you do need to wait for the anaesthetic to work.

The team will take detailed measurements in the pre-operative clinic to ensure the correct lens is chosen. There are different options including fixed distance and varifocal lenses. Your surgeon should be able to guide you as to the best option.

Most people find that the surgery is very easy to tolerate. The anaesthetic drops can sting a bit when they go in, but only for a few seconds.

Q What happens after surgery?

A It takes about six weeks for the eye to fully recover, but most are fine after two weeks.

You will need to put drops into the eye regularly after surgery. You might need assistance with this. If you are able to use drops yourself but struggle to get them in the right place, there are gadgets available to help - AutoDrop or EziDrop. If you have a weak grip, the AutoSqueeze ergonomic grip can help.

You might find that you don't need glasses after your surgery, or that your prescription has changed a lot after the surgery. You need to wait 4-6 weeks for your eye to fully settle before having an eye test for a new pair of glasses. You might need new glasses before you are able to meet the legal driving requirements so do check with your surgeon or optician before driving after cataract surgery.

It is fine to carry on with normal activities after a cataract operation. This includes bending and lifting as normal for you.

Q Can cataracts come back once I've had surgery to remove them?

A No- they don't come back.

Some people develop some thickening of the capsule at the back of the eye, which can seem as if the cataract is returning with the vision becoming hazy again. This is easily treated with a laser to make a small hole in the capsule if needed. Your optician will let you know if there is any thickening that needs treating.

Q Can I prevent cataracts occurring?

A You can reduce the risk of cataracts by

- Wearing sunglasses- ultraviolet light increases the chances of cataracts
- Stopping smoking
- Reducing your alcohol intake

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- Eating a diet rich in vitamin C, Vitamin E and Lutein - leafy green vegetables such as spinach and kale are particularly good. However, if you wish to take a supplement, ICaps are specifically formulated to contain the correct doses of vitamins and minerals to support eye health and are readily available to purchase from pharmacies.
- Making sure your blood pressure is checked and levels are good.

Q I have diabetes- is there anything else I need to be aware of?

- A** Diabetes increases your risk of cataracts and keeping your blood glucose well controlled will reduce the risks.

People with diabetes should have eye checks at least once a year. You should be called for annual diabetic eye screening where photographs are taken of the back of the eye, but you should also make sure you see your optician each year for a full eye health check as the photos do not check the front of the eyeball or the lens where cataracts start to form.

Q Is there anything else I need to know?

- A** Eye health is very important and, as we get older, problems with the eye are more common. The eyes can also show up early signs of other illnesses such as diabetes and high blood pressure, so regular checks with your optician are very important.

It is advised that everyone should have an eye test at least once every two years. Your optician may recommend an earlier check if you have some eye conditions such as glaucoma or macular degeneration. You should always see your optician sooner if you have concerns about your eyesight changing.

Small changes in your eyesight can also affect your ability to judge distances and increase the risk of falling. Regular checks and up to date prescription lenses can make a huge difference to this and help to keep you safer.

Q Where can I find out more?

- A** If you want to find out more about cataracts, call 01480 474074 and ask to speak to one of our Medical Advisers who will be able to answer any further questions you have.