

# Cataracts



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# Overview

Cataracts are formed when the clear lens inside your eye becomes cloudy or misty. This is a gradual process that usually happens as we get older. It does not hurt. The early stages of a cataract do not necessarily affect your sight.

The only proven treatment for a cataract is surgery. If the cataract gets to the stage where it affects your sight, your optometrist will refer you to a hospital to have this done. The surgery is carried out under a local anaesthetic and has a very high success rate.



Watch our video about cataracts at [lookafteryoureyes.org/cataracts](https://lookafteryoureyes.org/cataracts).

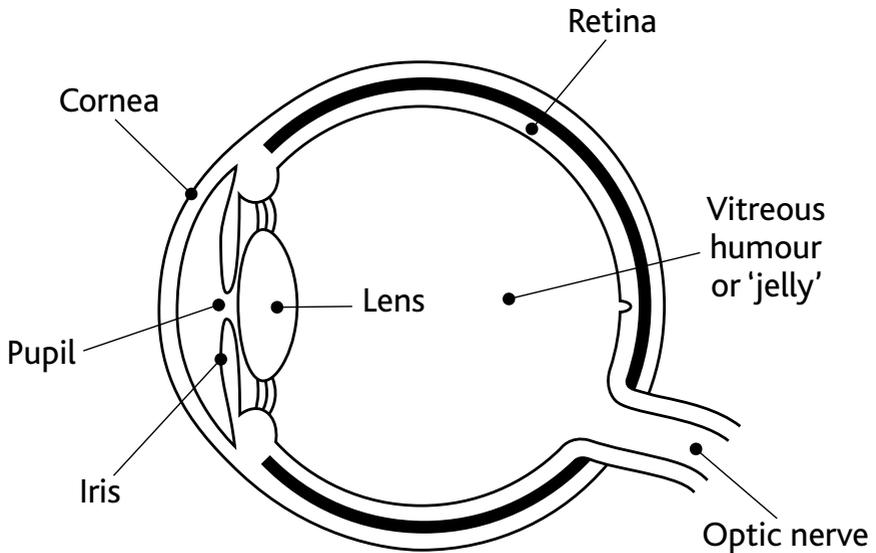


If you have any concerns about the health of your eyes, please visit your local optometrist. Optometrists are the eye health specialists in the community.

## What causes cataracts?

The main cause is ageing and most people will eventually develop a cataract in both eyes, although one eye may be affected before the other. Both men and women can develop cataracts.

Younger people can develop cataracts if they have an injury to the eye. Some medical conditions such as diabetes, or taking some sorts of medication such as steroids, may also cause cataracts. A very small number of babies are born with a cataract.



## Will cataracts affect my vision?

If you have cataracts you may notice that your vision is less clear and distinct. Car headlights and streetlights can become dazzling, and you may experience difficulty moving from shade to sunlit areas. Colours may look different too, and become faded or yellowed. If you experience any of these symptoms, make an appointment to see your optometrist.

If you are long-sighted, you may even notice that you need your glasses less than you did before you had the cataract! It may be that the cataract is causing a change to your long or short sight, and your sight can be improved simply by changing your glasses.

We have more information, and a video of how cataracts may affect your vision, on our website at [lookafteryoureyes.com/ataracts](http://lookafteryoureyes.com/ataracts).

## Can I prevent cataracts?

There are various supplements on sale which claim to help slow the progression of cataracts and some eye drops are sold as a treatment for cataracts. There is no scientific evidence to suggest that any of these can prevent or treat cataracts.

Smoking and prolonged exposure to ultraviolet (UV) light increase your risk of developing cataracts.

Car headlights and streetlights can become dazzling, and you may experience difficulty moving from shade to sunlit areas.

Stopping smoking and wearing good-quality sunglasses may provide some protection against cataracts, as well as other eye conditions.

Drinking a lot of alcohol and being overweight can also increase your risk of developing cataracts, so you should try to maintain a healthy weight and limit the amount of alcohol you drink.

You cannot make cataracts worse by using your eyes too much.

### Can I drive if I have cataracts?

If you have cataracts, you may continue to drive as long as you still meet the vision standards for driving. Your optometrist will be able to advise you about this. You do not need to tell the DVLA (or DVA in Northern Ireland) about your cataract unless you cannot meet the vision standards for driving.

### Treating cataracts

If your cataract is affecting your day-to-day life (for example, driving, reading or cooking), and your optometrist cannot improve your vision enough by changing your glasses, you can ask them to refer you to an ophthalmologist (specialist eye doctor) for surgery. This involves removing the cloudy lens (the cataract) and replacing it with a clear plastic one. If you have cataracts in both eyes, surgery will normally be carried out on one eye at a time.

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## What does cataract surgery involve?

You will have an initial appointment where you will be asked about your general health to help make sure that the operation is suitable for you. In some parts of the UK, the NHS arranges for optometrists to discuss the operation with you rather than you having this all done at hospital.

The ophthalmologist may also be able to correct short- or long-sightedness so that you may not need to wear your glasses as much after the operation as you did before. The ophthalmologist will assess and measure your eyes to decide what strength lens to put in your eye during the cataract operation.

Contact lenses may affect the accuracy of these measurements so if you wear contact lenses, you must leave them out for a week before you have these measurements taken.

Most cataract operations are done using a local anaesthetic. You will be awake, but the ophthalmologist will make sure you do not feel the area around your eye. Some people may also be offered sedation.

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You will hear the ophthalmologist explaining what they are doing, and you may see some vague movements around your eye. The ophthalmologist will make a tiny cut in your eye to remove the cataract, and will normally insert a plastic replacement lens so that you can see clearly. This will usually take around 15 to 45 minutes.

You will not normally need stitches, but your eye will be covered to protect it from knocks after the operation. You will be allowed to go home the same day, but should have someone to go with you and to look after you for 24 hours after surgery. Do not drive.

### **If I have cataracts in both eyes, will the operation be done on both eyes together?**

You will usually have one cataract removed at a time. However, some surgeons will carry out the operation on both eyes at the same time if they think you are at low risk of complications.

### **What are the risks of cataract surgery?**

Most people find that cataract surgery is successful and are happy with the results. However, as with all surgery, there are risks involved and you should not have the operation unless you feel it is right for you. Before you have surgery your surgeon will discuss the risks with you.

### **Can I choose not to have the operation?**

If a cataract is not interfering with your daily life, it is safe to leave a cataract in your eye. It does not become more difficult to remove if you delay having surgery, although you will not be able to see as well as the cataract gets worse. The cataract does not have to become 'ripe' for you to have the operation.

## After the operation

You will be given eye drops to use for the first few weeks after your operation. You should avoid heavy lifting and strenuous exercise immediately after the operation, but you can carry on with most other activities around the home as normal. Nearly all of your vision will return within two days of surgery and you should be able to return to your usual daily routine 24 hours after the operation.

You should avoid eye make-up, swimming, and getting soapy water in your eyes when you wash your hair for two weeks after the operation. If you go out on a windy day, you may feel safer wearing sunglasses to prevent grit getting in your eye. Ask your ophthalmologist about when you can go back to work.

If you have any concerns, give the eye clinic a call for advice.

## Will I need new glasses after my cataract operation?

Your eyesight will settle down in a few days or weeks. After cataract surgery most people need to wear glasses for distance vision, near vision or both. If you wore glasses before the operation, you will probably find that they will need changing after the operation, so you will need to see your optometrist again for an eye examination a few weeks after the surgery.

You should avoid eye make-up, swimming, and getting soapy water in your eyes when you wash your hair for two weeks after the operation.

Your ophthalmologist or optometrist will tell you when you can start driving again. You may find that it takes a few weeks to adapt to your vision with new glasses after cataract surgery. This is normal, and is due to your brain adapting to a different prescription.

### Will the cataract come back?

After some months or years, you might notice that your vision becomes cloudy or misty again in the eye where the cataract has been removed. This is not the cataract returning, but is due to the sac which contains the replacement lens clouding up. You can have this cloudiness removed by painless laser treatment in a matter of minutes. Contact your optometrist if you are worried that this is happening to you.

### Do cataracts only develop in one eye?

If you have had a cataract removed from one eye, it is likely that you will need the same treatment for the other eye at some point in the future.

### Charles Bonnet syndrome

If you have low vision you may experience visual hallucinations. These may be quite vivid. They are caused by the brain trying to 'fill in' detail in the blind areas and are called Charles Bonnet syndrome. They are not a sign of mental illness. You can find help and more information at [charlesbonnetsyndrome.uk](http://charlesbonnetsyndrome.uk).

**For more information, please talk to your local optometrist.**

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Please visit **[lookafteryoureyes.org](http://lookafteryoureyes.org)**  
for more information.

This information should not replace advice that your optometrist  
or other relevant health professional gives you.

Your local optometrist

If you would like this leaflet  
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**patients@college-optometrists.org.**

The College of Optometrists  
42 Craven Street  
London, WC2N 5NG

Website: [lookafteryoureyes.org](http://lookafteryoureyes.org)

