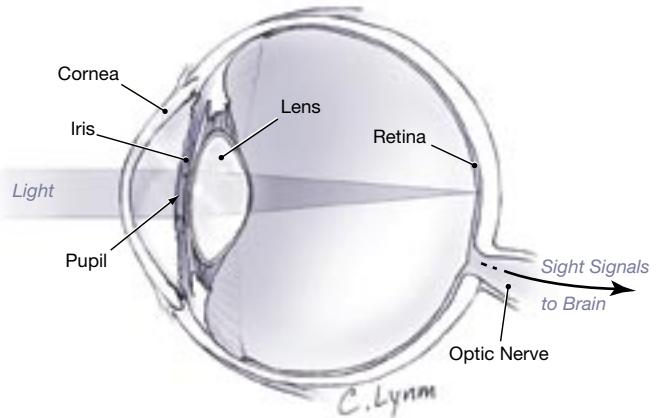


# Cataracts

As part of our **visual** (sight) system, each eye contains a lens. The **lens** is a clear, disc-shaped structure behind the **pupil** and **iris**. The lens focuses light beams on the **retina**, the back part of the eye that sends sight signals to the brain. When the lens becomes cloudy, vision blurs. Clouding of the lens is called a **cataract**.

Cataracts are common, especially in older individuals. As a normal part of the aging process, the lens gradually becomes cloudy. A simple eye examination by an **ophthalmologist** (eye physician) can detect a cataract. The July 9, 2003, issue of *JAMA* includes an article about cataracts.

Cross Section of the Eye



## SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF CATARACTS

- Blurry or dim vision
- Trouble seeing at night
- Needing brighter light to read
- Seeing halos around objects or lights
- Sensitivity to glare
- Rapid changes in eyewear prescriptions

Cataracts are not painful. They do not cause itching, redness, or discharge from the eye.

## RISK FACTORS FOR CATARACTS

- Age
- Smoking
- Diabetes
- Exposure to sunlight
- Alcohol use
- Previous eye injury
- Premature birth
- Corticosteroid medications

## CATARACT SURGERY

Cataracts should be removed when they interfere with vision for everyday activities. Cataract surgery is common. More than 1.5 million cataract surgeries are performed in the United States each year. The success rate for cataract surgery is about 98%.

There are several types of cataract surgery, but all remove most of the clouded lens. Sometimes local anesthetic drops are used to numb the eye for the operation. For some individuals, injections are given to make the eye painless and not able to move during the surgery. Sedating medications may be given during the procedure, but they may not be required in all cases. For many patients, the clouded lens is replaced by a clear artificial lens inside the eye. Other patients may need a contact lens or special glasses after the operation. Your ophthalmologist will describe the techniques used for your particular case.

Recovering from a cataract operation is usually simple, but you will be asked to follow some instructions, such as not lifting heavy objects or bending from the waist. Talk with your ophthalmologist about your personal risks and benefits from cataract surgery.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- National Eye Institute  
301/496-5248  
[www.nei.nih.gov](http://www.nei.nih.gov)
- American Academy of Ophthalmology  
415/561-8500  
[www.aao.org](http://www.aao.org)
- American Society of Cataract and Refractive Surgery  
703/591-2220  
[www.ascrs.org](http://www.ascrs.org)

## INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page link on JAMA's Web site at [www.jama.com](http://www.jama.com). Many are available in English and Spanish. A Patient Page on age-related macular degeneration was published in the November 13, 2002, issue.

Sources: American Academy of Ophthalmology, American Society of Cataract and Refractive Surgery, National Eye Institute

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