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ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS OFTEN ASKED ABOUT CATARACTS

Q *What is a cataract?*

A A hardening of the lens of the eye which makes it cloudy. There are many causes of cataracts but the commonest occur as we age. A cataract does not affect your health or harm your eye in any way but it reduces your vision and may cause other symptoms such as glare around bright lights or more frequent changes of glasses than usual.

Q *Can a cataract be treated with laser?*

A No. If your cataract is reducing your vision it needs to be removed by an operation, not by laser treatment. A small number of patients need laser treatment a few months after the cataract operation but most do not.

Q *Must a cataract be 'ripe' before it can be removed?*

A No. As soon as your vision is being affected by a cataract an operation will usually be recommended.

Q *What happens when I come into hospital?*

A Once the admission formalities have been completed a nurse will put some eye drops into your eye. Normally three doses are put in during the hour and a half before the operation. The drops will cause the pupil of the eye to enlarge so that the cataract is clearly visible at the operation.

Q *What happens at the operation?*

A Your own lens, which has become cloudy, is removed (see 'Phacoemulsification' below). It is replaced by a plastic lens - an 'implant'. This is not the same as a contact lens and you will not need to remove or touch the implant at any time. It lasts for life, usually without any problems.

Q *Will I be asleep or awake for my operation?*

A Some patients need to have a 'general anaesthetic' and are asleep for the operation. However, most patients now have a 'local anaesthetic' and are awake throughout the operation. You can choose which you have.

Q *What does a local anaesthetic mean?*

A It means that you will be awake for your operation. When you arrive in the operating theatre you will be given some anaesthetic eye drops and your eye will be cleaned and covered in preparation for the surgery. Extra anaesthetic may be given before the operation begins but this is not always needed. You will feel no discomfort during the operation which takes about 20 minutes.

Q ***What happens after the operation?***

A You may stay in the hospital overnight or you may prefer to go home (see Day Case Surgery, below). If you stay overnight your dressing will be removed the next morning. If you go home on the day of operation you will be given instructions on how to remove your dressing yourself at home.

Either way, when you leave you will be given eye drops to use at home and instructions about what to do and what to avoid. Your eye will be checked again a few days later and if all is well there will be a final visit after about three weeks.

Q ***What is Day Case Surgery?***

A After your operation in the usual way you return home without spending a night in hospital. *It is important to have someone with you overnight after the operation.* You will be given instructions on how to remove your dressing the following morning. You will also be given eye drops to use at home and some instructions about what to do and what to avoid. Your eye will be checked again a few days later.

Q ***What is 'phacoemulsification'?***

A Phacoemulsification is now the standard technique for removing cataracts. The operation is done through a much smaller incision than was used for cataract surgery in the past. This results in quicker recovery of the eye after the operation and an earlier return to normal activities. Glasses may also be changed sooner. Very few cataracts are not suitable for removal by phacoemulsification surgery.

Q ***How soon will I be able to live a normal life again?***

A You will be able to do most normal activities straight after the operation. Shopping or gentle gardening will do no harm. Bending down to put on shoes or to pick up light things is also allowed. You will be advised not to rub the eye and to avoid lifting anything heavy for a few days. Activities are quickly increased to normal during the 2 weeks following the operation.

Q ***Will I be able to see well straight after the operation?***

A Many, but not all, patients see better straight away. Some gradually improve during the early healing period which lasts two to three weeks. Further healing continues slowly during the following two to three months. A change of glasses, especially for reading, is often needed to achieve the best vision.

Q ***What should I do about my glasses?***

A If you normally wear glasses they will no longer be the correct strength for the eye which has had the operation. A change of spectacle lens by your optician (optometrist) will be recommended at your final hospital visit, about three weeks from the operation. A further change of prescription is occasionally needed about 6 months after the operation.

Q ***Can my cataract come back?***

A No. However, a few patients develop a little thickening close to where the cataract was. If this happens the vision may become slightly cloudy again. This can usually be treated very easily, as an outpatient, with a laser (see the Information Sheet: 'YAG Laser Treatment').

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