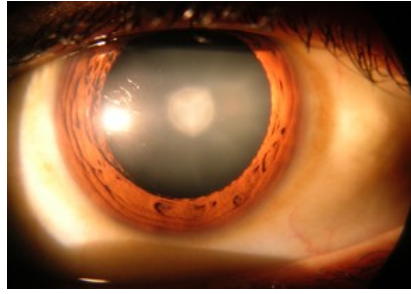


Cataracts



A cataract is a cloudy area in the lens of the eye that leads to a decrease in vision of the eye. Cataracts often develop slowly and can affect one or both eyes. Symptoms may include faded colors, blurry or double vision, halos around light, trouble with bright lights, and difficulty seeing at night. This may cause difficulty in driving, reading, or recognizing faces. Poor vision caused by cataracts may also result in an increased risk of falling and depression. Cataracts cause 51% of all cases of blindness and 33% of vision problems worldwide. Cataracts are most commonly due to aging but may also occur due to trauma or radiation exposure, be present from birth, or occur following eye surgery for other problems. The underlying mechanism involves accumulation of clumps of protein or yellow-brown pigment in the lens that reduces transmission of light to the retina. Diagnosis is by an eye examination.

Risk factors include diabetes, longstanding use of corticosteroid medication, smoking, prolonged exposure to sunlight, and alcohol.

Epidemiology

About 20 million people worldwide are blind due to cataracts. It is the cause of approximately 5% of blindness in the United States and nearly 60% of blindness in parts of Africa and South America. Blindness from cataracts occurs in about 10 to 40 per 100,000 children in the developing world, and 1 to 4 per 100,000 children in the developed world. Cataracts become more common with age. In the United States, cataracts occur in 68% of those over the age of 80 years. Additionally, they are more common in women, and less common in Hispanic and Black people.

Treatment and management

Wearing sunglasses, using a wide brimmed hat, eating leafy vegetables and fruits, and not smoking can reduce the risk of developing cataracts, or slow down the process. In the initial stages, the symptoms can be improved with glasses. If this does not help, surgery is the only effective treatment. Surgery removes the cloudy lens and replaces it with an artificial lens. Cataract surgery is not available in many underdeveloped countries.