

## CATARACTS

Cataracts are the leading cause of decreased vision in the world. They affect the crystalline **lens** of the eye. The lens sits behind the colored part of the eye, the iris, and light that enters the pupil must pass through the crystalline **lens**. The lens is made of a protein called collagen. The collagen is clear and flexible when young and begins to discolor and become more rigid as we age.

There are many kinds of cataracts. Some patients are born with cataract changes that occurred during their mothers` pregnancy (**Congenital Cataracts**). A cataract in a child must be evaluated as soon as it is found. Some develop because of diseases such as diabetes or long-term medication like steroids (**Posterior Subcapsular Cataracts**). Others occur because of injuries to the eye or metabolic diseases that upset the body`s chemical balance.

The most common form of cataract is the age-related change that occurs because of oxidation of the collagen protein in the lens. Such a cataract may undergo a transformation in color from crystal clear to a slight yellowing to a dull yellow-brown. This process is called **Nuclear Sclerosis** ( `sclare-oh-sis` ). Neglected cataracts, mostly found in third world countries, can become brown-black and very dense (**Hyper mature Cataracts**).

The rehabilitation of eyes with cataracts is one of the great stories of modern medicine. With the introduction of small incision surgery (**Phacoemulsification**) in the 1970s and the adoption of intraocular lens (**IOL**) implantation, it is not unusual to provide a quality of vision not previously experienced. The surgery is generally safe although the eyes must be evaluated preoperatively to rule out preexisting disease such as retinal, macular or optic nerve damage that can affect postoperative vision. Most patients begin to experience improved vision shortly after the operation although eye drops must be used for about six weeks after surgery. Today`s surgery is performed on an outpatient basis and requires little in the way of anesthetics and little operating room time. Short-acting drugs are used to insure comfort and decrease anxiety.

Cataract surgery is almost always an elective procedure. However, if a cataract interferes with a person`s vision, function and enjoyment of life, its removal should be conscientiously considered.