

Cataracts in infancy and childhood



Normal vision



Cataract simulation

What is a cataract?

A cataract is a clouding of the clear lens in the eye leading to vision loss (not relevant for congenital cataract). While cataracts most commonly occur in those who are older, they can develop in younger people as well. Some people are born with a cataract.

Cataracts can result in varying levels of vision loss. Vision can become blurred and discoloured. Vision may also reduce due to glare sensitivity.

What causes cataracts in children?

Sometimes no single cause for cataracts can be identified. There may be a family history of cataract or it can happen spontaneously. Cataracts can also develop due to infection of the unborn baby in the womb, genetic conditions and some metabolic genetic conditions. The cataract can form in one or both eyes.

What treatment is available?

Congenital cataracts (present at birth) and developmental cataracts (develop early in life) are the most commonly treated by surgically removing the cataract from the eye. Some cataracts are slow to progress and do not cause an interruption to normal patterns of visual development. The size of the cloudy area of the lens, the degree of density of the cataract and the position of the opacity in the lens will all be a factor in the determination of whether the child needs to have surgical removal of the cataract and how soon after birth the cataract should be removed.

These considerations will be assessed by the ophthalmologist (eye doctor) who will advise the primary carer/s as to the best course of action for the child.

Why is surgery necessary?

Removing the cataract will allow light to pass through to the retina (the inner layer of the back of the eye containing light sensitive cells for seeing).

The brain needs to have a clear image from the retina to enable normal visual development. If the brain does not receive a clear picture from the eyes early in life, then vision is unlikely to develop normally. This condition is known as amblyopia or 'lazy eye'.

What happens when the cataracts are removed?

Prognosis for vision after cataract surgery is generally good.

Once the cataract is surgically removed, the ophthalmologist may replace the biological lens with an intraocular plastic lens. Alternatively, the child will need to wear glasses or contact lenses to replace the role of the lens. It is essential for the child to wear their glasses or contact lenses during waking hours to ensure visual development.

It is important that the child continues to be regularly reviewed by the ophthalmologist following surgery as other eye conditions may develop (such as glaucoma).

How can Vision Australia help?

Vision Australia provides support and services to people of all ages and stages of life who are blind or have vision loss.

We work with people to achieve what's important to them such as studying, finding or retaining employment, leading an active social life or continuing to do the things they love.

With the support of our professional teams, people who are blind or have low vision can develop their skills and make use of technology and equipment that will enable them to live independently.

Vision Australia also provides access to the Felix Library for younger children to promote early literacy skills.

Contact Vision Australia

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