

Cataracts in children - teens

The medical term is...

Congenital or Juvenile Cataract

But it is often called ...

Childhood Cataract

Intro

Cataracts affect the lens that is inside our eye behind the pupil. The lens focuses light entering the eye onto the retina at the back of the eye, a crucial step in the process of seeing.

The lens should be transparent, and a cataract is cloudiness of part or all of the lens. Cataracts that cloud the whole lens may seriously affect your sight and may need an operation.

Childhood cataract occurs most commonly in newborn babies (congenital cataract) but can occur at any age (juvenile cataract). Age-related cataracts, which affect much older people in their sixties and above, are very common.

What does the word mean?

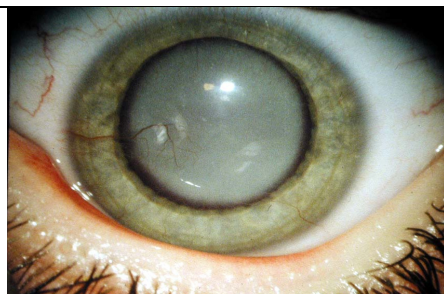
The word cataract comes from the Greek word 'kataraktes' meaning waterfall. Nobody really knows how the word became associated with this eye condition, but maybe having cataracts is a little like trying to see through pouring water.

How you see the world

Cataracts cause blurry vision. How well you can see depends on where the cataract is in the lens and how cloudy it is.

How the world sees you

If a cataract is very bad the lens will become white and cloudy and can be seen as a grey or white pupil. Most cataracts are not noticeable to other people.



A cataract causing a grey pupil



An ophthalmoscope



Examining the eyes with a slitlamp

What causes it?

Childhood cataracts are a major cause of sight loss worldwide and, although most have no known cause, there are a number of factors that can cause them:

Genetic (inherited)

Some babies inherit cataract, which means that it is passed on through the family, and other relatives may have had childhood cataracts.

Metabolic disorders

Chemical processes in our body transform the food we eat into energy. In metabolic disorders, such as galactosaemia or diabetes, these processes don't work normally. This may cause cataracts.

Syndromes

If you have other major health problems this occasionally causes cataract.

Infections

If a pregnant woman catches certain infections, such as the virus Rubella (German Measles), it can increase the chance of her baby getting cataracts.

Drugs

If the mother takes certain medications or drugs during pregnancy this can sometimes lead to the baby having cataracts.

How can the doctor tell?

When a baby is born in a UK hospital it has a number of routine tests before being allowed to go home. If the baby is born at home the tests are done by a GP. Babies are usually tested again after six to eight weeks. One of these tests helps check for cataract. This is called a red reflex test (see below).

How does that work? Red Reflex Test

The red reflex test is used to check for problems in the eye, including cataracts. The doctor will look through a special torch called an ophthalmoscope at the child's eyes. Light is shone into the eyes and should be reflected back from the retina to be seen as a red glow in the pupils (the same as "red eye" in photos). By looking at the shape and colour of the red reflection the doctor can tell if there is any major abnormality in the eyes.

Children with cataract are examined by an orthoptist who will measure the vision. After having eye drops, an eye doctor (ophthalmologist) will examine the eyes to assess how cloudy the cataract is and whether the rest of the eye is normal. This sometimes requires an ultrasound scan to take a picture of the inside of the eye through the closed eyelids.

You might be seen by a paediatrician (children's doctor) to look for any cause of the cataracts.

Facts

- Cataracts cannot be spread from one eye to the other, although they may develop in both eyes.
- Cataracts may not require treatment.
- Cataracts can only be cured with surgery but sometimes the vision can be improved with glasses or patching.

Getting it sorted

It is important to find children's cataracts as early as possible, so that treatment can be given if needed to make sure the vision develops. Not all cataracts in children need an operation, which can cause complications. Treatment may involve wearing glasses or an eye patch for part of the day. Surgery involves removing the lens and, in most but not all cases, replacing it with an artificial one. However, in some children glasses or contact lenses can be used instead of an artificial lens.

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Credits

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