Cataracts Encyclopedia Article

Cataracts

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Contents

Cataracts Encyclopedia Article.....1

Contents.....2

Cataracts.....3

Cataracts

An opaque formation on the lens at the back of the eye that can block light to the retina and lead to loss of vision.

Cataracts commonly afflict elderly people, but in rare instances an infant may have cataracts in one or both eyes at birth. This condition can result if the mother contracted an infectious disease during pregnancy, and cataracts are sometimes linked with other congenital disorders such as **Down syndrome.** However, there is no known cause for many infant cataracts. The cataract appears as a white spot in the pupil, and the size, shape, and density vary widely. Some can be viewed with a flashlight, others only with special opthalmological instruments when the pupils are dilated. If the cataract is large or dense enough to obscure vision, the child will need surgery to remove it. If surgery is needed for congenital cataracts, it is usually performed within the first few weeks or months of the child's life. After surgery, the child is fitted with corrective lenses—whether glasses or **contact lenses.** Surgery can be deferred if the cataracts do not seriously interfere with the child's vision.

See Also

Eye and Vision Development

For Further Study

Organizations

American Academy of Ophthalmology
Address: P.O. Box 7424
San Francisco, CA 92120-7424

National Eye Institute
Address: Building 31, Room 6A32
Bethesda, MD 20892
Telephone: (301) 496-5248