

ADVANTAGE

Cataracts



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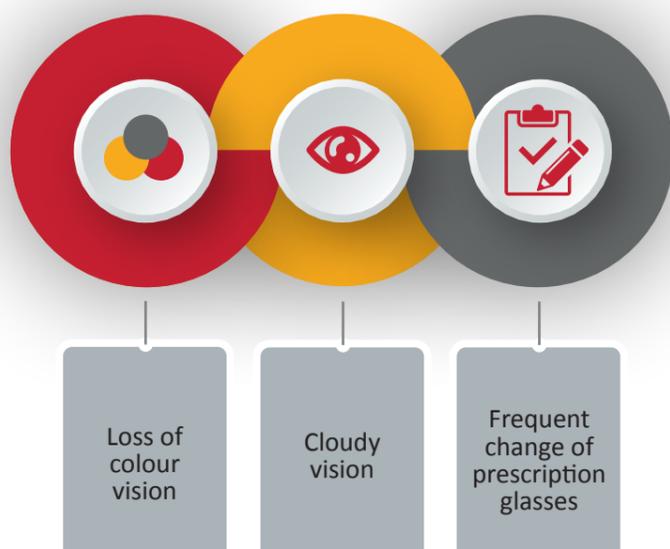


Clouding of the lenses of the eye

What causes cataracts?



What are the symptoms?



Questions

for Dr Thapelo Motshudi

1 What are cataracts?

Cataracts refer to clouding of the lenses of the eyes, which limits the amount of light passing through, leading to a decrease in vision. The affected person gets an impression that there is a hazy cloud covering the eye, making it difficult to see.

2 What causes cataracts?

A number of conditions can be responsible for cataracts, however the most common cause is advanced age, and this is called senile cataracts. This form develops over many years and is barely noticeable, with affected people generally thinking that the gradual loss of vision is “normal”. Occasionally one can also be born with cataracts, called congenital cataracts. This can be due to infection or abnormal development inside the womb, or due to injuries. In early adult life cataracts might develop due to excessive exposure to ultraviolet light, diabetes, radiation exposure, trauma, and some toxic substances. Cigarette smoking is also associated with the condition.

3 What are the symptoms?

Symptoms and their severity will vary from person to person, however one can expect some of the following:

- Cloudy or foggy vision
- Increased glare, most often noticed when looking at headlights at night
- Loss of colour vision
- Frequent change of prescription glasses
- Improvement in near vision but deterioration in far vision
- Once advanced it will even be possible to notice that the eye has turned white.

4 How are cataracts diagnosed?

Health professionals, most commonly GP’s or optometrists, sometimes notice the signs of cataracts even before the affected individual becomes aware of the problem. However, in the advanced stages it is often the patients themselves who present to their doctors complaining about loss of vision. Once the condition is suspected, tests will be performed to confirm the diagnosis using specialized equipment. Ultimately one will be referred to an ophthalmologist for management.

5 What is the treatment?

In instances where the underlying condition is known, like diabetes, then treatment must also be directed at this while managing the cataracts themselves. So far there is no proven oral medication to treat the disease. In the initial stages prescription glasses can be adequate, including using magnifying glasses to read fine writing. Once the disease has progressed to the point where it interferes with normal activities of daily living, then surgery is indicated. Cataract surgery involves replacing the affected lens with an artificial lens, and usually the effects are dramatic and life changing for most patients. If you suspect that you have cataracts consult your general practitioner or optometrist.