

Eye Insights on Cataracts and Amblyopia

August is National Cataract and Amblyopia Awareness month. Each is a condition of the eye which can cause unnecessary losses of vision and/or blindness. Awareness about these conditions and what you can do about them will help you to preserve your sight, and the sight of your children.

Cataracts

Years ago the word “cataract” usually meant a gradual loss of vision followed by blindness. And, years ago, when people had cataract surgery, it meant they had to be extremely careful for days, sometimes weeks ... patients could not move their heads, could not bend over to tie their shoes, could not drive their cars, and their activities were restricted in other ways.

Things are different today ... cataracts, although they still dim the vision and cause blindness, are not the bane they were years ago. Today’s surgery allows patients who have had cataract surgery to, in most instances, return home the same day surgery is performed, and return to work the next day.

Cataracts are most commonly found in our senior population as a process of aging. However, some cataracts are congenital (a baby is born with them), and some develop from eye injuries, inflammation, excessive sunlight, or long-term steroid therapy. Cataracts are not contagious, they are not an eye infection, they are not a piece of skin or tissue growing over the front of the eye causing blindness. Rather, cataracts are a clouding and hardening of the eye’s lens.

Cataracts blur and cloud the vision. They can cause a need for frequent changes in eyeglasses, and cause problems with night vision and lights (headlights seem too bright at night, lamps seem to shine intensely and blindingly, sunlight is too bright, halos glow around lights).

At the onset of cataracts, vision may be improved through the use of prescription glasses or contact lenses. Magnifying lenses or strong lighting may also be helpful. There is no medication that will prevent or cure cataracts.

When the cataract impairs vision to the point that daily activities are affected despite the use of eyewear, the only effective treatment is cataract surgery. After surgery, the vision is usually normal or even better than before surgery. Sometimes corrective eyewear may still be needed for near or distant work.

It’s reassuring to know that cataracts are no longer a sign of oncoming blindness ... that we have a viable alternative ... cataract surgery ... to help us maintain and preserve our sight.

Amblyopia

Amblyopia is not an eye disease, but rather, an eye condition that can cause functional blindness if left uncorrected. It causes more visual loss in the under 40 age group than all eye injuries and diseases combined in this age group. It is estimated that

approximately 2-3 percent of the children's population suffers from this form of visual impairment.

Amblyopia is a condition in which the vision of only one eye is affected; it is neurological in origin. The brain, for some reason, does not fully acknowledge what it sees with one eye. As a result, the affected eye becomes "lazy" and increasingly lets the other eye do the work of seeing. If the condition is allowed to continue without treatment, the good eye becomes stronger, and the affected eye (known as the "lazy" or amblyopic eye) grows weaker. The good eye begins to limit the action of the amblyopic eye which in turn results in a permanent decrease in the vision of the lazy eye until the eye becomes functionally blind.

Since this condition primarily affects children, it often goes undiagnosed until it is too late for vision to be fully restored. Many parents do not take their infants and toddlers for comprehensive eye exams to check for this disease; and, many children who have the disease are unaware of it since amblyopia usually occurs in one eye and they are oblivious of the fact that they are not seeing properly. At a later age, when a comprehensive eye exam is performed and the condition is discovered, vision loss may have already occurred. Unfortunately, vision lost through amblyopia cannot be restored through the use of eyeglasses.

The best way to deal with amblyopia is through early detection and correction. Treatment before the age of two offers the best chance for normal vision to be restored. Treatment between the ages of 2 and 6 is fairly successful, but results generally decrease with age. Vision therapy has been found to improve this condition even in early adulthood, but requires more effort.

Since it is far easier to prevent vision loss than to regain lost vision, please consider having your infant's or toddler's eyes checked today! It might save the child's sight!

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