

Dispelling the myths about cataracts

Cataract is the term used to define opacity or cloudiness of the normally clear, crystalline lens of the eye. In the eye, the lens changes thickness via ciliary muscle activity thereby focusing light on the fovea located in the retina. When the lens ceases to be clear, we experience blurring of vision, increased glare sensitivity, and relative near sightedness. Among the common causes of this condition are heat, (eg tropical weather conditions), UV exposure, trauma, some infections, diabetes and other metabolic disorders, steroid-containing drops, and most commonly, aging.

Let me first establish a fact. **Cataracts are totally reversible in the absence of any permanent damage to the optic nerve or retina.** When some patients are told of this diagnosis, the first question is “Doc, does this mean you will have to scrape my eye?” The answer is no. I still struggle to discover the origin of this term! We do not scrape the eye! In fact, the modern way of treating this condition is to extract or remove the damaged lens through a small opening made at the limbus of the cornea (where the white and brown of the eye meet). This is done either by cutting the lens into small pieces or using ultrasound to fragment the lens and removing it (Phaco). In either case, the posterior capsule of the lens is left behind, and an artificial implant is injected or folded and placed inside the eye so the patient can see again. As a bonus, the power of the lens can be chosen to correct pre-existing vision problems such as near-or far-sightedness.

The procedure is performed under local anesthesia. However, for children and other special cases, general anesthesia is used. In fact I perform most of these procedures just using powerful drops to numb the eye. The operation lasts under 30 minutes, and most patients report having no pain or discomfort in the post-operative period.

So in a nutshell, there is nothing to fear in an uncomplicated cataract. There are doctors across the Island capable of removing the cataract and restoring vision through the above procedure.

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