
PATIENT INFORMATION

CATARACT SURGERY

This leaflet provides information about cataracts and a brief overview of what to expect before and after surgery.

A cataract is clouding of the natural lens in your eye. As a cataract develops, light can not enter the eye so easily and your vision gets worse. Early symptoms include glare and difficulty in reading and watching television. Cataracts are a major cause of poor vision in older people.

Why do cataracts occur?

Cataracts occur as a natural aging process of the lens. Therefore they are more common in people who are elderly. They also occur more commonly in people from sunny countries, patients who have diabetes and patients taking certain medication such as steroids. Cataract surgery is the commonly performed operation in this country and over 120,000 cataract operations are performed every year in the United Kingdom.

What is the treatment?

Cataracts can be very successfully treated by an operation to remove the cloudy lens and replace it with a lens implant. The surgery is usually done through a very small incision and the natural lens removed with an ultrasound probe. A new foldable lens implant is placed inside the eye. This implant requires no attention and remains in place for life.

What happens at the initial consultation?

After examining you, your consultant will discuss the options with you. The discussion will involve an explanation of the benefits and risks of cataract surgery. The spectacle correction outcome will also be discussed and consideration of using multifocal implants if appropriate. These implants are sometimes referred to as premium implants. Not all patients are suitable for multifocal implants and the majority of patients usually require monofocal implants. Your eye needs to be measured to calculate the power of the implant. Your specialist may do this or an appointment will be made for you to have the measurement done.

What happens on the day of the surgery?

Most cataract surgery is done under local anaesthetic. This may involve anaesthetic eyedrops or an injection around the eye. During the surgery you should not feel any significant discomfort. If it is uncomfortable more anaesthetic can be given. Occasionally it may be more appropriate for you to have your surgery under a general anaesthetic. Just before starting the surgery the skin around your eye will be cleaned with a special antiseptic/antibacterial wash. A clear drape will be placed over your face and the eyelids of the operated eye will be held open with a speculum.

The operation usually takes about 20 minutes. Some people are aware of blurred images during the surgery and you will also hear noises associated with the surgery. Usually a stitch is not required. However, if you do have stitches it does not mean that the operation has gone wrong it is just more appropriate for your eye. At the end of the operation a pad and a plastic shield will be placed over the eye.

What happens after the operation?

A member of staff will go through the precise details on how to look after your eye following the operation. You will be asked to keep the plastic shield on overnight. You will be given eye drops before you go home to use for approximately four weeks. This will help you reduce any inflammation and prevent infection. You should be able to go home shortly after the operation. It is recommended that you arrange for a relative or a friend to collect you and accompany you home. The operated eye should not be uncomfortable. If you already use drops for glaucoma you should continue using these drops until the next day along with the new drops.

Your consultant will arrange to see you within a few days following the surgery. If your eye becomes painful or the vision deteriorates then you should contact your specialist urgently or attend an eye casualty department.

What are the risks?

Surgery is generally safe. Ninety-six percent of cataract operations are successful and uncomplicated.

About 1 in 20 cataract patients may have a problem either during or after the surgery. The majority of these do not lead to serious problems. In some cases the surgery can be complicated by a tear in the capsular bag in which we place the implant. If this occurs the surgery may have to be modified and the operation may take longer to heal.

Rarely, about one in a hundred patients may have a serious problem following surgery such as a haemorrhage, retinal detachment or secondary glaucoma. Please discuss this with your specialist in more detail if you are worried or unclear.

When should I expect my vision to improve?

Your vision is often much better within 24 hours but sometimes you may have to wait for improvement to occur. Remember when you are having the second eye done the improvement does not seem as much compared to the first eye.

Administrative note:

The OPCS procedure codes for cataract surgery are C7122 for unilateral and C7125 for bi-lateral. If you have private health insurance please quote this code to your insurers in order to obtain preauthorisation for your claim.