



## COMMON CONDITIONS

# Now See Here

What You Can & Can't Do About Age-Related Eye Diseases

**I**F YOU'RE OVER 50, CHANCES ARE your vision has changed. "In most people, the process starts in their early 40s, when they start noticing difficulty focusing close up," says Natasha Herz, M.D., who serves as department chair for Ophthalmology at Washington Adventist Hospital in Takoma Park.

For older adults, there's no escaping presbyopia. Presbyopia, which literally means aging eye, occurs when the crystalline lens loses its flexibility. "That's why so many people need reading glasses in their 40s," Herz says. A natural part of the aging process, presbyopia is not considered a disease and cannot be prevented, according to the American Optometric Association.

**THE MOST COMMON AGE-RELATED EYE** disease is cataracts. "Everyone gets cataracts to a certain degree," says David Yeh, M.D., a Riverdale ophthalmologist with privileges at Doctors Community Hospital in Lanham. "It may not progress to the degree it affects your vision, but if you live long enough, you will get it."

A cataract occurs when the lens in the eye gets cloudy, most often due to protein that clusters together. Cataracts usually form slowly, so vision

worsens gradually. "Two common, classic symptoms are blurred vision and glares or halos. Some people might have clear vision, but when driving at night, notice that bright lights bother them," says Yeh.

For decades, people waited until they were practically blind before undergoing cataract surgery, which used to be a major undertaking that required a hospital stay of 10 or more days and a convalescence of several months. The adoption of a procedure in the 1970s known as phacoemulsification now allows ophthalmologists to make a small, self-sealing incision through which an ultrasound probe is inserted to break up the natural lens before suctioning out the fragments.

Cataract surgery takes about 15 minutes, according to Herz, and is done on an outpatient basis using a topical or intraocular anesthetic. "While it may take a full month to completely heal and have all the inflammation and swelling go away, a lot of people see and feel well enough to drive by the next day," she says. As a result, surgery now is recommended when cataracts begin interfering with everyday activities, such as reading, driving, watching television, cooking or climbing stairs. [continued on 34]

**In the last eight years, premium implants have become available that help people see at more than one distance without glasses.**

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