

## **EYE-Q**

by R. Thomas Barowsky, MD

### **March is National Cataract Awareness Month**

The American Academy of Ophthalmology and the National Eye Institute of the National Institutes of Health have designated March as National Cataract Awareness Month to assist the public in becoming more aware of the effects that cataracts have in shaping our lifestyle through decreased vision.

I will dedicate the next several columns to explaining what cataracts are, how common they are, how they affect our vision, how they are diagnosed and what are the alternatives in the treatment of cataracts. So pull up a chair, grab a little light refreshment and prepare to be informed.

Cataracts form in the lens of the eye. The lens is responsible for helping to focus light on to the retina to assist with clear vision. The lens is located right behind the iris (or colored part of the eye) and is approximately the diameter of a regular size aspirin tablet. In thinking about the make-up of the lens it is sometimes easy to think of it like a cherry. The capsule of the lens is like the skin of the cherry; the cortex much like the pulp and the central nucleus of the lens is like the pit of the cherry. Cataracts interfere with the normal make-up of the lens and this is what causes them to interfere with our vision.

There are several different kinds of cataracts. Some are very slow to develop and some develop quite quickly. The type of cataract that develops in your eye is dependent on many factors including age, environmental and social factors, underlying medical conditions, prescribed medications and family history. By far the most common factor in cataract development is age. Basically, if you live long enough everyone will develop cataracts to some degree.

So, just how common are cataracts? According to statistics from the National Eye Institute and Research to Prevent Blindness, over 5.5 million people in the United States have a cataract that is interfering with their vision. That means almost one in fifty people living in the USA have a vision problem due to cataracts. Additionally, over 400,000 new cases of cataract are diagnosed in the USA every year. With our aging population this number will only go up over the next 10-15 years. If we play around with the numbers a little we can see that over 1,000 new cases of cataract will be discovered every day this year or around 45 new cataracts per hour in the USA. This certainly helps to explain why the number one surgical procedure paid for and reported by Medicare is removal of a cataract.

Currently, there is no proven way to prevent the development of cataracts unless you quit having birthdays. This is not something that I would recommend to any of my patients. A recent study at the University of Maryland demonstrated, in early animal studies, that caffeine may have a protective effect on potential cataract development. Unfortunately, it seemed to indicate that high doses of caffeine, in the range of 500 mg per day, was

required. Since the average person consumes around 250 mg of caffeine per day, one would have to double their intake. This is probably not good for your heart or for the people around you. Not to fear, the same researchers are working on an eye drop that may help to concentrate the caffeine in the eye where it can do its work. Don't expect anything on the market for years because this study is very early in its development.

By careful control of any medical conditions that may influence the cataract development process and by supplementing your diet with antioxidants like beta-carotene and vitamins C and E you can reduce the risk of cataract development or slow their progress. In addition, by wearing 100% UV-protected sunglasses when outside you will significantly reduce your risk of cataract progression from ultraviolet light.

*If you have questions about your eye health e-mail Dr. Barowsky at [doctom@tdkj.com](mailto:doctom@tdkj.com) and we'll try to answer your questions here at Eye-Q.*