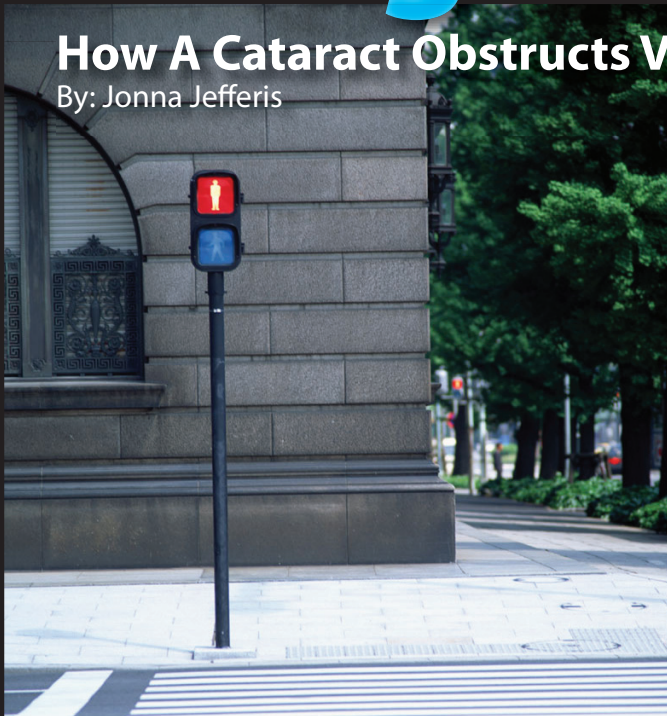


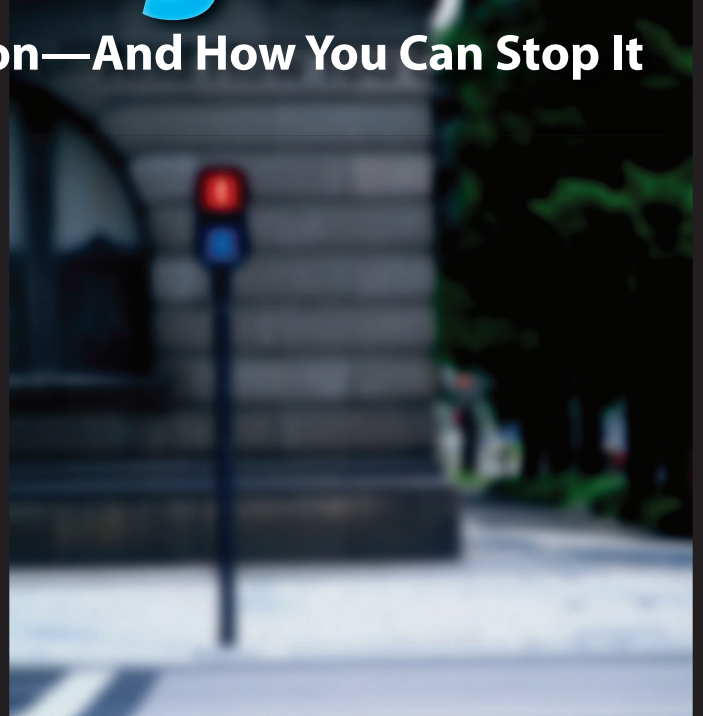
# Seeing the Light

## How A Cataract Obstructs Vision—And How You Can Stop It

By: Jonna Jefferis



*Normal Vision*



*Vision with Cataracts*

Yes, he was 74 years old, but Russell Tibbs, a retired newspaper photographer, counted his blessings. He had a strong heart, no arthritis, plenty of friends and a small wedding photography business, which he operated out of his home, that paid the bills. Today, though, he was considering cutting back on his work in the basement darkroom.

The long hours Russell spent watching images come up on the photo paper in the developer pan were making him very tired. The other day, he had seen a peculiar cloud over a groom's head that he couldn't account for. On another film roll, the bride's dress appeared brownish yellow—and he knew that couldn't be right.

It was a mystery. Maybe it was time, he thought, to finally invest in a computer and "go digital," as his son kept urging him to do. Instead, he took the advice of his 80-year-old sister, Winnie, who told him, in no uncertain terms, "Go see your eye doctor!"

Russell would have been interested to learn that the 19th century French Impressionist painter Claude Monet experienced the same visual phenomena as Russell had—cloudiness and discoloration—while he was painting. Monet recorded what he called his "visions" on canvas, even after surgery was performed to remove the cataract that was causing them.

Today more than 20 million Americans age 40 and older have cataracts, a leading cause of decreased vision among the elderly.<sup>1</sup> In fact, half of those over 80 either currently have cataracts or have had cataract surgery.<sup>2</sup>

This might be a frightening statistic, but it shouldn't be. Cataracts are one of the most reversible causes of visual impairment, as Russell Tibbs was about to learn from his ophthalmologist.

### Light Interrupted

A cataract restricts a person's ability to see by preventing light from entering the eye. The transparent lens that covers the outermost part of your eye is made up of water and protein. Normally, light travels through the lens to the retina, where it is changed into nerve signals that are sent to the brain. When protein cells become damaged, they clump in the lens, forming a cataract that blocks the light. The result: blurred or foggy vision.

Scientists cannot identify what triggers the protein damage, but several conditions predispose its occurrence. One of the ways doctors define types of cataracts is by these conditions, described below.

- Many cataracts are age related. These often first appear in middle age, but vision loss is most likely to occur in those over age 60.<sup>3</sup>

- Secondary cataracts form after surgery for unrelated eye problems. They might also be related to other health problems, or to long-term exposure to certain medications, ultraviolet light or radiation.
- Traumatic cataracts develop in response to an eye injury, sometimes years after the injury occurred.
- Congenital cataracts affect children, who may either be born with them or develop them in childhood.

Other risk factors include exposure to cigarette smoke or air pollution, poor nutrition and heavy alcohol consumption.<sup>4</sup>

## Symptoms To Look For

A cataract may cause few symptoms in its early stages. Even when symptoms become severe, however, some people may not be aware of changes in their vision because there is no discomfort. Watch for these important signs:<sup>5</sup>

- Cloudy or blurred vision.
- Double vision, or the appearance of multiple images in one eye.
- Poor night vision. You might be bothered by glare coming from car headlights.
- Light sensitivity. Sunlight and headlights could seem too bright. Lamps for reading might seem too dim.
- Sudden temporary improvement in close-up vision.
- Change in your color perception. Images could take on a yellow or brownish tint.
- Need for frequent eyeglass or contact lens prescription changes.

## See Your Eye Doctor

Because cataract development can be slow, it is essential to get regular comprehensive eye examinations in order to detect it early, so that treatment can begin and vision loss can be minimized or corrected. Included are the following tests:

- Visual acuity test. Be sure to bring or wear your glasses and/or contact lenses.
- Dilated Fundus Evaluation (DFE). The doctor will put drops in your eyes to dilate (widen) the pupil so that he or she can examine the back of your eye.
- Tonometry test. The pressure inside your eye is measured, often with a puff of air.

## Eat Your Vegetables

There are additional ways to take care of your eyes. Limit their exposure to smoke and air pollution. When you are in the sun, wear protective eyewear and a wide-brimmed hat.

Several research studies have suggested that a healthy diet may also protect against cataract development.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, vitamins C and E, as well as the antioxidants lutein and zeaxanthin, were found to have a preventive effect.

Good sources of vitamin C are citrus fruits such as oranges, grapefruits and strawberries, as well as cantaloupe, dark green vegetables and tomatoes. Vitamin E is plentiful in peanuts, sunflower seeds and corn oil. Lutein and zeaxanthin can be found in dark green vegetables, persimmons and orange peppers.

Permanent vision loss from cataracts can be prevented by adopting a healthy lifestyle, being aware of cataract symptoms and, most importantly, having your vision tested regularly.

Russell Tibbs had his cataract surgically removed, and is currently taking a break from the photography business while it heals. His vision is better than ever. When Russell learned that exposure to pollutants could contribute to cataract development, he decided to close his darkroom—with its heavy fumes of developer solution—and finally buy that digital camera.

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*Nothing in this article is intended, nor should it be construed, as professional advice. Those reviewing the information should consult with a qualified professional.*

### Sources

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- <sup>2</sup>"Cataract," Prevent Blindness America.
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