

Fact Sheet

Division of Child and Adolescent Health
Pediatric Screening and Genetic Services
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Cataracts

What are cataracts?

A cataract is clouding of the lens of the eye. The lens focuses light onto the back of the eye. A cataract can look like a whitish spot on a normally dark pupil. This can result in hazy or blurred vision. Cataracts can occur in one or both eyes.

What types of problems occur with cataracts?

Children with cataracts may have vision problems, depending on how much of the lens is affected. The vision problems can range from mild to severe. If the cataract is not treated, the child's eye may not develop normally. A child with a cataract may also have other health problems.

How common are cataracts?

Cataracts occur in about 3 in every 10,000 births each year in the United States. In Virginia, about 11 babies are reported each year with a cataract.

What causes cataracts?

Cataracts in infants may be inherited (run in the family). One treatable genetic cause can be galactosemia. Galactosemia is a condition that results when milk sugar (galactose) is not broken down due to the lack of a chemical in the body. Early diagnosis of galactosemia through newborn screening may prevent cataracts. Cataracts may also be caused by infections during pregnancy.

Cataracts can occur as the only birth defect a child has, but they can also occur in combination with other birth defects as part of a syndrome (combination of findings). The way in which a syndrome is passed through the family is specific to the given syndrome. A genetic counselor or geneticist can help you determine the risks for your family and situation.

How are cataracts treated?

If the cataract is affecting the child's vision, surgery may be performed to remove the cloudy lens. The child will then need a substitute lens to see with the affected eye. He or she may receive an intraocular lens (a plastic lens inserted during surgery), contact lenses, or glasses. If only one eye had the cataract, the good eye may need to be covered with a patch to help the other eye learn to see.

Where can I go for more information about cataracts?

NIH/National Eye Institute
www.nei.nih.gov
301-496-5248

March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation
www.modimes.org
1-888-MODIMES (1-888-663-4637)

Prevent Blindness Virginia
www.preventblindness.org/VA
1-888-790-2020

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