

## Cataracts after Treatment for Childhood Cancer

Childhood cancer treatment sometimes requires the use of medications or radiation that can increase the risk of developing cataracts. Because vision can have a significant impact on daily living, it is important for survivors who received these treatments to have their eyes checked regularly.

### What is a cataract?

A cataract is clouding of the normally clear lens of the eye. Cataracts often develop slowly, but as the clouding increases, vision can be affected.

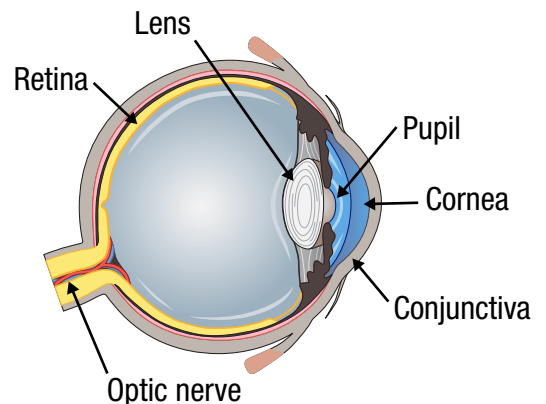
### How does a cataract affect vision?

The eyes are remarkable organs, allowing light to be converted into impulses that are transmitted to the brain, where images are perceived. Light enters the eye through a clear layer of tissue known as the **cornea**. The cornea bends and focuses the light, and sends it through the opening of the eye known as the **pupil**. The pupil controls how much light enters the eye. Behind the pupil is the **lens** of the eye, which focuses the light onto the retina, the membrane along the back wall of the eye. The nerve cells in the retina change the light into electrical impulses and send them through the **optic nerve** to the brain, where the image is perceived. When the **lens becomes cloudy due to a cataract**, the image delivered to the retina becomes blurry.

### What are the symptoms of a cataract?

Common symptoms of cataracts include:

- Painless blurring of vision
- Sensitivity to light and glare
- Double vision in one eye
- Poor night vision
- Fading or yellowing of colors
- The need for frequent changes in prescriptions for glasses or contact lenses



### What cancer therapies increase the risk of developing cataracts?

- Certain medications, including:
  - **Busulfan**
  - **Corticosteroids**, such as prednisone and dexamethasone
- **Radiation therapy** to the following areas:
  - Eye and surrounding tissue (orbits)
  - Head or brain (cranial)
  - Total body irradiation (TBI)

- **The risk for cataracts increases** with:
  - Higher radiation doses
  - Frequent exposure to sunlight
  - The passage of time (the longer off therapy the survivor is)

### What monitoring is recommended?

- Have an eye examination every year during your regular check-up
- See an eye specialist (ophthalmologist or optometrist) for a full eye evaluation:
  - **Every year** if you had:
    - TBI
    - High doses (30 Gy or 3000 cGy/rads or higher) of radiation to the head, brain or eyes
    - A tumor involving the eye
  - **Every 3 years** if you had:
    - Lower doses of radiation

### How are cataracts treated?

Not all cataracts need treatment. In many cases, an ophthalmologist may monitor the vision closely over many years, and will recommend treatment if and when it becomes necessary. The only treatment for cataracts is surgical removal of the lens and replacement with an artificial lens. Today, cataract surgery is a low-risk procedure that is performed on an outpatient basis and usually is successful in restoring vision.

### How can I keep my eyes as healthy as possible?

- Wear sunglasses with UV protection when in bright sunlight.
- When participating in sports, be sure to select protective eyewear that is appropriate for the sport. Eyewear worn for sports should be properly fitted by an eye care professional.
- Avoid toys with sharp, protruding or projectile parts.
- Never play with fireworks or sparklers of any kind to avoid accidental injury.
- Be careful when working with hazardous household chemicals.
- Wear protective eyewear when using a lawnmower, power trimmer, or edger, and when working with dangerous equipment in the workshop.
- If you do experience an eye injury, seek medical attention promptly.

---

Written by Teresa Sweeney, RN, MSN, CPNP, After Completion of Therapy Clinic, St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, Memphis, TN; and Wendy Landier, RN, PhD, CPNP, CPON®, Survivorship Clinic, City of Hope National Medical Center, Duarte, CA.

Reviewed by Lisa Bashore, PhD, RN, CPNP, CPON®; and Joan Darling, PhD

Additional health information for childhood cancer survivors is available at  
[www.survivorshipguidelines.org](http://www.survivorshipguidelines.org)

**Note:** Throughout this *Health Links* series, the term “childhood cancer” is used to designate pediatric cancers that may occur during childhood, adolescence, or young adulthood. Health Links are designed to provide health information for survivors of pediatric cancer, regardless of whether the cancer occurred during childhood, adolescence, or young adulthood.

#### Disclaimer and Notice of Proprietary Rights

**Introduction to Late Effects Guidelines and Health Links:** *The Long-Term Follow-Up Guidelines for Survivors of Childhood, Adolescent, and Young Adult Cancers* and accompanying *Health Links* were developed by the Children's Oncology Group as a collaborative effort of the Late Effects Committee and Nursing Discipline and are maintained and updated by the Children's Oncology Group's Long-Term Follow-Up Guidelines Core Committee and its associated Task Forces.

**To cancer patients (if children, their parents or legal guardians):** Please seek the advice of a physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition and do not rely on the Informational Content. The Children's Oncology Group is a research organization and does not provide individualized medical care or treatment.

**To physicians and other healthcare providers:** The Informational Content is not intended to replace your independent clinical judgment, medical advice, or to exclude other legitimate criteria for screening, health counseling, or intervention for specific complications of childhood cancer treatment. Neither is the Informational Content intended to exclude other reasonable alternative follow-up procedures. The Informational Content is provided as a courtesy, but not intended as a sole source of guidance in the evaluation of childhood cancer survivors. The Children's Oncology Group recognizes that specific patient care decisions are the prerogative of the patient, family, and healthcare provider.

No endorsement of any specific tests, products, or procedures is made by Informational Content, the Children's Oncology Group, or affiliated party or member of the Children's Oncology Group.

**No Claim to Accuracy or Completeness:** While the Children's Oncology Group has made every attempt to assure that the Informational Content is accurate and complete as of the date of publication, no warranty or representation, express or implied, is made as to the accuracy, reliability, completeness, relevance, or timeliness of such Informational Content.

**No Liability on Part of Children's Oncology Group and Related Parties/Agreement to Indemnify and Hold Harmless the Children's Oncology Group and Related Parties:** No liability is assumed by the Children's Oncology Group or any affiliated party or member thereof for damage resulting from the use, review, or access of the Informational Content. You agree to the following terms of indemnification: (i) “Indemnified Parties” include authors and contributors to the Informational Content, all officers, directors, representatives, employees, agents, and members of the Children's Oncology Group and affiliated organizations; (ii) by using, reviewing, or accessing the Informational Content, you agree, at your own expense, to indemnify, defend and hold harmless Indemnified Parties from any and all losses, liabilities, or damages (including attorneys' fees and costs) resulting from any and all claims, causes of action, suits, proceedings, or demands related to or arising out of use, review or access of the Informational Content.

**Proprietary Rights:** The Informational Content is subject to protection under the copyright law and other intellectual property law in the United States and worldwide. The Children's Oncology Group retains exclusive copyright and other right, title, and interest to the Informational Content and claims all intellectual property rights available under law. You hereby agree to help the Children's Oncology Group secure all copyright and intellectual property rights for the benefit of the Children's Oncology Group by taking additional action at a later time, action which could include signing consents and legal documents and limiting dissemination or reproduction of Informational Content.