

Cataract Surgery and Macular Degeneration

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I am frequently asked by patients with age-related macular degeneration (or ARMD, for short) if cataract surgery will help them. The question is understandable. Cataract surgery is one of the most successful surgeries done on any part of the body, and you likely have friends and neighbors who see much better after this surgery. However, the answer in patients with ARMD is not always clear.

To briefly review, a cataract is a clouding of the lens in the front part of the eye. Macular degeneration is a problem involving damage to the central part of the retina in the back of the eye. If you think of your eye as a camera, a cataract is like having a cloudy or smudgy lens on the camera, while macular degeneration is like having “bad” film. The success of cataract surgery in people with ARMD depends on how much of the vision problem is due to the cataract and how much is due to ARMD. We can “cure” a cataract and restore vision through surgery, but unfortunately, we do not have a cure for ARMD yet.

The eye exam sometimes makes it clear whether or not surgery makes sense. For instance, if the cataract looks pretty dense and the macular degeneration looks mild, we can be very optimistic that surgery will help improve vision. On the other hand, if the cataract looks mild and the macular degeneration looks severe, surgery

may not help much. The difficulty is that a lot of people fall somewhere in between: it's not so clear from the exam whether cataract surgery will help a lot, a little, or not at all.

There have been a number of tests designed to tease apart how much of a patient's vision problem is due to a cataract and how much is due to ARMD. However, none of these tests has been shown to be better than the doctor's judgment after an eye exam. As if this weren't confusing enough, there is also a concern that cataract surgery may cause ARMD to get worse. While there has been some research that says the surgery may make ARMD worse, a lot more indicates that the surgery has no effect.

My recommendation to patients with both cataracts and ARMD who are considering cataract surgery is to consider how your vision is doing now. If you are "getting by" with your current vision (even if it is not perfect), it may not make sense to have surgery. On the other hand, if you are having specific vision problems (like difficulty reading, seeing TV, or doing a favorite hobby), please discuss these problems with me so I can give you an idea of how likely it is that we will be able to help you through cataract surgery.