

Cataracts and driving

October 2020

Some medical and eyesight conditions may affect the ability to drive safely. VicRoads Medical Review aims to support drivers to drive at any age so long as they are medically fit to do so.

Good eyesight is essential for driving in order to see and respond to the road and adjacent environment, including other vehicles, signs, signals, pedestrians and hazards.

Good vision is particularly important to safely complete manoeuvres such as changing lanes, merging and negotiating intersections.

This fact sheet provides information about cataracts and driving, including:

- How this condition may impact safe driving
- How to manage your condition to stay safe on the road
- How the VicRoads Medical Review process supports you in managing your condition in relation to driving
- Where to get more information.

What is a cataract?

A cataract is a clouding of the lens – the part of the eye that focuses light on the retina to create a clear image.

Cataracts mostly affect people over 50, and they are the leading cause of vision impairment in this age group. They can however occur at any age and some people are born with cataracts.

Cataracts can affect one or both eyes and can cause:

- blurred, hazy or dim vision,
- seeing "halos" around lights,
- sensitivity to light and glare,
- fading or yellowing of colours, and
- double vision in the affected eye.

Difficulty seeing at night is often the first sign of the condition, along with a need for brighter light for reading and other activities.

In the early stages, vision can be improved by using corrective lenses. Surgery to replace the lens is effective in restoring vision as the impairment increases (see overleaf).

The following images provided by the Vision Initiative are indicative of possible visual changes associated with cataracts compared to normal vision.



Full healthy vision



Cataracts (indicative only)

Early action improves sight and safety

Cataracts develop slowly, so you may not notice changes in the early stages of the condition. As there is no pain or other warning signs, it is very important to have regular eye checks to detect cataracts.

With early detection, corrective lenses can be prescribed to ensure your vision is as good as it can be. You should have periodic eyesight checks to monitor any changes to your vision and to review whether new corrective lenses are required.

If you notice any sudden changes in vision between your regular checks, you should see your eye health professional as soon as possible.

How do cataracts affect driving?

The clouding and blurring of vision, and the other effects described above, may have a significant impact on your ability to drive safely.

You may need to wear corrective lenses when driving to ensure your vision meets the national eyesight standards ([Assessing Fitness to Drive, Austroads 2016](#)). A condition will be placed on your licence specifying the requirement to drive with corrective lenses (see *Conditional licences* overleaf).

You may need to avoid night driving if you have difficulty seeing at night or coping with the glare from vehicle headlights.

All Victorian drivers are required by law to notify VicRoads if they have a long-term, chronic health condition or disability that could affect their ability to drive safely. This includes conditions affecting vision such as cataracts.

What do you need to do if you are diagnosed with cataracts?

It is important to speak to your doctor or eye health professional early on so that you understand your condition and the potential impacts. You might ask about:

- How your condition currently impacts on driving
- What might be long-term impacts on driving
- What treatments might be possible/necessary to enable you to continue driving
- Whether transitioning to not driving in the future will be required
- How often your eyes and vision should be checked
- Where you can get more information
- Notifying VicRoads about your cataract diagnosis.

Notifying VicRoads Medical Review is simple. Ask your eye health professional to complete and submit a VicRoads eyesight form. Keep a record of this report.

Alternatively, you can notify VicRoads by phone, email, fax or mail using the contact details below.

What happens at Medical Review?

Once you notify Medical Review, you will be asked to provide a report from your eye health professional (if not already submitted). A medical report from your treating doctor may also be required.

The Medical Review team will review the report/s and make a decision about your driving based on the national medical standards ([Assessing Fitness to Drive, Austroads 2016](#)), which include vision and eye disorder standards for driving.

Most people with cataracts who report to VicRoads early in their condition will be able to continue to drive, but with requirements which aim to maintain road safety, such as regular eyesight reviews.

What is a conditional licence?

Conditional licences permit driving under circumstances that suit the capacity of the driver. For example, with cataracts, you may be able to continue to drive with restrictions such as:

- Wearing corrective lenses
- Driving only in daylight hours
- Driving only in local familiar areas
- Having regular vision reviews with your eye health professional to check that your vision continues to meet the required standards.

This approach helps you to stay safe on the road and to identify when a change in prescription or further treatment (i.e. surgery) is required.

VicRoads will contact you to advise you of the Medical Review outcome, next steps or to request further information.

Drivers of commercial vehicles

Due to the nature of their work, drivers of commercial vehicles such as trucks, taxis, hire cars and buses are required to meet stricter visual standards than private vehicle drivers.

Sometimes a driver with cataracts may not be able to drive a commercial vehicle, while still being able to drive a private car. Your eye health professional and the VicRoads Medical Review team will provide case by case advice in such circumstances.

More about cataracts

Are you at risk of cataracts?

Cataracts are a normal part of the ageing process, however there are other risk factors, including:

- diabetes,
- excessive exposure to sunlight,
- smoking,
- obesity,
- high blood pressure,
- previous eye injury or inflammation,
- previous eye surgery,
- prolonged use of corticosteroid medications, and
- excessive drinking of alcohol.

Discuss these risk factors with your eye health professional so that they can recommend more frequent testing if required.

What are the treatment options?

When the vision impairment can no longer be managed with corrective lenses, cataract surgery is usually recommended.

This involves removing the cloudy lens and replacing it with an artificial lens which restores normal clear vision.

The surgery is performed under local anaesthetic and is normally conducted as a day procedure.

If corrective lenses are not needed after surgery, this requirement can be removed from your licence. Your eye health professional will need to make this recommendation in writing to VicRoads Medical Review.

When surgery is not an option, the use of low vision aids, advice and information can assist you to maintain independence in daily living tasks. If your vision does not meet the standards you will not be able to continue driving.

Regular monitoring by your eye health professional optimises your ability to have good vision and drive for as long as possible.

Where can you get more information?

VicRoads Medical Review

Website: vicroads.vic.gov.au

Email:

medicalreview@roads.vic.gov.au

Phone: (03) 8391 3226 or VicRoads on 13 11 71 (TTY 13 36 77, Speak and Listen 1300 555 727).

Fax: (03) 9854 2307

Mail: Medical Review, PO Box 2504, Kew 3101 VIC

Vision Australia

Phone: 1300 84 74 66

Website: visionaustralia.org.au

Vision Initiative

Website: www.visioninitiative.org.au/

Good Vision for Life (an initiative of Optometry Australia)

Website:

<https://goodvisionforlife.com.au/>