

# What Can You Do to Help Prevent Cataracts?

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✓ Fact Checked

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Cataracts is an eye condition that causes your vision to blur due to a buildup of proteins on the lens of your eye. Left untreated, cataracts can result in progressive loss of vision and, ultimately, blindness
- › The most common treatment for cataracts is surgery, but it's not without risks. In 42% of cases, cataract surgery results in dry eyes, and in 20% of cases, it leaves the patient with a droopy eyelid
- › Your eyes are significantly affected by blood sugar. Chronically high blood sugar from poor nutrition and lack of exercise can trigger long-term damage to your body and make you more prone to eye diseases, including cataracts, glaucoma and blindness
- › Antioxidants found in leafy greens and colorful berries and vegetables can help prevent and/or treat cataracts. Key nutrients include carotenoids like lutein, zeaxanthin, astaxanthin and vitamin C
- › Other natural remedies for cataracts include N-acetylcarnosine (NAC) drops and N-acetylcysteine amide (NACA) drops

In the video above, Dr. Eric Berg, a chiropractor and health educator, reviews what he believes are some of the best natural alternatives to prevent and/or treat cataracts.

Cataracts<sup>1</sup> is an eye condition that causes your vision to blur due to a buildup of proteins on the lens of your eye. Left untreated, cataracts can result in progressive loss of vision and, ultimately, blindness.

Risk factors for cataracts include heavy alcohol use, smoking, older age, diabetes, toxic substances, certain medications and trauma to the eye.<sup>2</sup> Signs and symptoms that cataracts are forming include:<sup>3,4</sup>

Blurry, cloudy or foggy vision

Changes in color perception

Difficulty driving at night due to glare from lights

Sensitivity to sunlight

Nearsightedness

Double vision

Glasses and contacts no longer seem to improve your vision

## **Cataract Surgery Is Not Risk-Free**

The most common treatment for cataracts is surgery, but as noted by Berg, it's not without risks. In 42% of cases, cataract surgery results in dry eyes, and in 20% of cases, it leaves the patient with a droopy eyelid. Other potential side effects include floaters, retinal detachment, eye infection, glaucoma, further vision loss and secondary cataracts.<sup>5</sup>

Like Berg, I would strongly encourage trying one or more natural remedies before resorting to surgery. He points out that scientific evidence showing the efficacy of natural remedies are typically scant, but that doesn't mean they're useless. The reason for this lack of scientific evidence is because few are willing to invest the funds required to study a compound that will never turn a profit.

You cannot patent foods or natural nutrients, for example, and supplements don't hold a candle with respect to profitability compared to drugs. You cannot charge hundreds or thousands of dollars for a bottle of supplements. On the other hand, the risk you take by trying a natural remedy is near nonexistent.

Adding more nutrients to your diet is not going to hurt you. At worst, you won't see a benefit. Keep in mind that when we're talking about food, and even supplements, it'll typically take several weeks or months before effects become noticeable, so stay with it long enough to make a difference.

## **Your Eyes Are Affected by Blood Sugar**

As explained by Berg, your eyes are significantly affected by blood sugar. Chronically high blood sugar from poor nutrition and lack of exercise can trigger long-term damage to your body and make you more prone to eye diseases, including cataracts, glaucoma and blindness.<sup>6,7,8</sup> Berg explains:<sup>9</sup>

*“When your blood sugar is high, it creates a lot of oxidative stress in different tissues, including the eyes. Our bodies produce [endogenous] antioxidants to protect against this oxidation and free radical damage. But certain things, like age and diet, can cause our bodies to make fewer antioxidants.*

*However, plants also make potent antioxidants that we can take advantage of to help counter the effects of oxidative stress. The two categories that we're focusing on today are carotenoids and anthocyanins.”*

## **Carotenoids and Anthocyanins Support Eye Health**

Carotenoids and anthocyanins are natural pigments found in fruits, berries and vegetables. Foods high in carotenoids include yellow, orange, red and purple fruits and vegetables, pasture-raised egg yolks and grass-fed meats.

Key carotenoids known for their protective effects on eye health include beta-carotene (a precursor for vitamin A), lutein, zeaxanthin and astaxanthin. I'll review some of the benefits and mechanisms of action of lutein and astaxanthin further below.

**“ Antioxidants found in leafy greens and colorful berries and vegetables can help prevent and/or treat cataracts. Key nutrients include carotenoids like lutein, zeaxanthin, astaxanthin and vitamin C.”**

Foods high in anthocyanins are red, purple and blue, such as bilberries, blueberries, blackberries, chokeberries, black currant and red cabbage (especially red cabbage sprouts), just to name a few. Berg’s homemade cataract remedy is a once-daily shake consisting of:

- 1 cup red, purple or blue berries of your choice
- 1 cup kefir (grass-fed, whole milk, unsweetened)

Kefir contains calcium and probiotics, both of which are thought to be protective against cataracts. Mix the two ingredients in a blender and either consume with a spoon or add a small amount of water to make it easier to drink. Also, consume a diet that is low in fructose, sucrose and other sugars, including lactose from milk, to prevent chronic elevations in blood sugar.

## **Antioxidant Eye Drops for Cataracts**

Other natural remedies for cataracts mentioned by Berg include N-acetylcarnosine (NAC) drops. This should not be confused with N-acetylcysteine, which is also known as NAC. N-acetylcarnosine has been shown to penetrate your cornea into the lens of your eye, where the cataract is located.

There, the NAC is metabolized into L-carnosine, which has an antioxidant effect on the cataract-affected lens. According to a systematic review by the Cochrane Library,<sup>10</sup> “NAC eye drops may reverse or even prevent progression of cataract, thereby improving vision and quality of life.”

A 2017 study<sup>11</sup> also found that N-acetylcysteine amide (NACA) drops were effective in reversing cataracts, while a 2022 study<sup>12</sup> concluded oxysterol, an oxygenated cholesterol derivative, effectively reversed cataracts in mice. As reported by Medical News Today:<sup>13</sup>

*“The researchers used oxysterol to attempt to alter the levels of alpha-crystallin B or alpha-crystallin A proteins present in the lenses of 26 mice. These proteins often cause cataracts to develop in aging.*

*The study showed that oxysterol improved lens opacity 61% of the time. This is a promising sign that oxysterol may be an effective, nonsurgical treatment for cataracts.”*

## **Lutein Protects Against Eye Diseases**

As mentioned earlier, **lutein** is a carotenoid that is really important for eye health and helps to protect against not only cataracts but also **glaucoma** and age-related macular degeneration (AMD), which is the No. 1 cause of blindness in the elderly.

Lutein concentrates in your macula, which is the part of your retina responsible for central vision. Along with **zeaxanthin** and meso-zeaxanthin (a metabolite of lutein), these three carotenoids form the retinal macular pigment, which not only is responsible for optimizing your visual performance but also serves as a biomarker for the risk of macular diseases.<sup>14</sup>

Lutein is also found in the lens, where it helps protect against cataracts and other age-related eye diseases. Among carotenoids, lutein is the most efficient at filtering out blue light – the type that comes from cellphones, computers, tablets and LED lights. Blue light induces oxidative stress in your eyes, which increases the risk of cataracts and macular diseases. Lutein, however, acts as a shield against it.

Your body cannot make lutein, so you must get it from your diet. Following are 10 foods that are particularly rich sources of lutein.

Dark leafy greens	Carrots	Broccoli
Egg yolks	Red and yellow peppers	Sweet corn
Avocados	Raspberries	Cherries
Paprika		

The word lutein comes from the Latin word “luteus,” which means “yellow.” If you remember this, it may help you pick out vegetables likely to contain higher amounts.

Lutein and zeaxanthin are often found together in foods, although zeaxanthin is far scarcer than lutein. According to a 1998 study in the *British Journal of Ophthalmology*,<sup>15</sup> orange pepper had the highest amount of zeaxanthin of the 33 fruits and vegetables tested.

## How Much Lutein and Zeaxanthin Do You Need?

While there's no recommended daily intake for lutein and zeaxanthin, studies have found health benefits for lutein at doses between 6 milligrams (mg) and 20 mg per day<sup>16,17,18</sup> and 2 mg per day for zeaxanthin.<sup>19</sup>

Research evaluating the effect of lutein, zeaxanthin and meso-zeaxanthin in combination, using a dose of 10 mg of lutein, 10 mg of meso-zeaxanthin and 2 mg of zeaxanthin per day for one year, found it helped improve vision in those who had normal vision at the outset.<sup>20</sup>

## How to Optimize Lutein Absorption

Lutein and other carotenoids are fat-soluble, so to optimize absorption, be sure to add a little bit of healthy fat to your meal. For example, research shows that adding a couple of eggs – which contain both lutein and healthy fats – to your salad can increase the

carotenoid absorption from the whole meal as much as ninefold.<sup>21,22</sup> Egg yolks are also a primary source of choline, which helps counter dry eye.<sup>23</sup>

Ideally, opt for organically raised, free-range pastured eggs. Not only do they tend to have a better nutritional profile, by opting for pastured eggs you'll also avoid pesticide exposure and genetically modified organisms.

Most commercially available eggs come from concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), where the hens are not permitted to forage on pasture. Instead, they're typically fed a diet of corn and soy, the vast majority of which are genetically engineered. CAFO eggs are also far more prone to cause foodborne illness caused by salmonella contamination.

If you live in an urban area, visiting a local health food store is typically the quickest route to finding high-quality local egg sources. Your local farmers market is another source for fresh free-range eggs. Cornucopia.org also offers a helpful organic egg scorecard<sup>24</sup> that rates egg manufacturers based on criteria that are important for organic consumers.

You can often tell the eggs are free-range by the color of the egg yolk. Foraged hens produce eggs with bright orange yolks, indicative of higher amounts of lutein and zeaxanthin. Another way to boost absorption of lutein from your vegetables is to add some raw organic butter or coconut oil to your salad.

## **Vitamin C Combats Cataracts**

Other nutrients are also beneficial for vision health. For instance, vitamin C is associated with a lower risk of cataracts. One study<sup>25</sup> compared vitamin C intake and the progression of cataracts in more than 320 pairs of female twins over the course of a decade.

It found that those who ate more vitamin C-rich foods lowered their risk of cataracts by one-third. Interestingly, vitamin C supplements were not associated with a reduction in risk.

Citrus fruits such as kiwis, oranges, lemons, limes and grapefruits are well-known for being high in vitamin C, but the fruit with the highest concentration of all is actually acerola cherries (also known as Barbados cherries). Each cherry has only 1 calorie, but 80 mg of vitamin C and associated micronutrients.

## **Astaxanthin – The Most Powerful Promoter of Eye Health**

Saving the best for last, **astaxanthin** is even more potent an antioxidant than both lutein and zeaxanthin, and many researchers believe it to be the most powerful antioxidant ever discovered for eye health.<sup>26,27</sup>

Astaxanthin is produced by the microalgae *Haematococcus pluvialis* when its water supply dries up, forcing it to protect itself from UV radiation. Besides the microalgae that produce it, the only other source are the sea creatures that consume the algae, such as wild salmon, shellfish and krill.

It's been found to have protective benefits against a number of eye-related problems, including cataracts, AMD, cystoid macular edema, diabetic retinopathy,<sup>28</sup> retinal arterial occlusion and venous occlusion, glaucoma,<sup>29</sup> and inflammatory eye diseases such as retinitis, iritis, keratitis and scleritis.

Astaxanthin easily crosses into the tissues of your eye and exerts its effects safely and with more potency than any of the other carotenoids, without adverse reactions. Specifically, astaxanthin has been shown to ameliorate or prevent light-induced damage, photoreceptor cell damage,<sup>30</sup> ganglion cell damage and damage to the neurons of the inner retinal layers.

Astaxanthin also helps maintain appropriate eye pressure levels that are already within the normal range and supports your eyes' energy levels and visual acuity. Depending on your individual situation, you may want to take an astaxanthin supplement. I recommend starting with 4 mg per day and working your way up to about 8 mg per day – or more if you're suffering from chronic inflammation.



Taking your astaxanthin supplement with a small amount of healthy fat, such as grass-fed butter, coconut oil, MCT oil or eggs, will optimize its absorption. Krill oil also contains high quality animal-based omega-3 fat in combination with naturally occurring astaxanthin, albeit at lower levels than what you'll get from an astaxanthin supplement.

## **Other Natural Strategies That Help Protect Your Vision**

Despite what your eye doctor may say, in my opinion, there are natural, common-sense strategies you can employ to help protect your healthy vision, starting with your diet. As discussed above, certain foods are more or less necessary for optimal vision and can go a long way toward protecting your eyesight throughout life.

This includes leafy greens and brightly colored vegetables, organic pastured egg yolks, black, blue and purple berries, and seafood rich in astaxanthin, such wild caught Alaskan salmon. Besides these dietary suggestions, here are a few other lifestyle strategies that can help optimize your eye health.

**Avoid blue light**, such as that from electronic screens, as blue light reduces melatonin in your lens, which is a big cause for cataracts. Avoiding blue light becomes even more important if you have cataract surgery, as your natural lens has some built-in protection against blue light whereas the artificial lens does not.

(UV-blocking artificial lenses are available through special order, but it's not standard.) So, if you get cataract surgery, wear blue-blocking glasses when looking at screens and when in artificial lighting indoors.

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**Quit smoking** — Smoking ramps up free radical production throughout your body and puts you at risk for less-than-optimal health in many ways. If you want healthy vision for your whole life, you cannot afford to risk less-than-optimal eye health with cigarettes.

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**Care for your cardiovascular system by getting regular exercise** — High blood pressure can cause damage to the miniscule blood vessels on your retina, obstructing

free blood flow. A regular exercise program can go a long way toward reducing your blood pressure. It's also critical for optimizing your insulin and leptin levels.

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**Normalize your blood sugar** – As mentioned earlier, chronically elevated blood sugar can damage your eyes and obstruct blood flow to your retina. To keep your blood sugar in a healthy range, follow my [comprehensive nutrition guidelines](#).

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**Avoid seed oils and processed foods** – Your eyes are highly susceptible to and damaged by polyunsaturated fats (PUFAs) such as [linoleic acid](#) (LA), so avoid cooking with seed oils (a.k.a. vegetable oils) and stay clear of processed foods.

I've previously [interviewed Dr. Chris Knobbe](#), an ophthalmologist who wrote a book on the historical progression of AMD, showing how it rose in tandem with the consumption of seed oils. His conclusion is that seed oils or high doses of omega-6, specifically LA, were the primary culprit not just in AMD but chronic diseases of all kinds.

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**Avoid aspartame** – Vision problems are one of the many potential acute symptoms of aspartame poisoning.

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