

Cataract Surgery Reduces Auto Crashes, Saves Lives

Cataract removal with lens replacement appears to save lives and millions of dollars by dramatically reducing the number of auto accidents, Australian researchers have documented in a large-scale study.

Jonathon Ng, M.D. and colleagues found that cataract surgery reduced the frequency of all auto crashes by 12.6 percent among a study sample of more than 27,000 elderly drivers in western Australia. The investigators calculated that the cost savings from this accident reduction was about \$4.3 million in Australian dollars (roughly equivalent to U.S. dollars). Each operation saved about \$150 in crash costs. By including all crashes rather than just fatal and hospitalization crashes, all possible cost-saving benefits of cataract surgery were taken into account.

At the outset of the research project, the investigators sought to determine the impact of a common, vision-improving treatment like cataract removal on crash rates. If the impact was significant, they questioned if health systems should make sure that people don't wait excessively between cataract diagnosis and surgery. To answer these questions, Dr. Ng and his colleagues studied accident rates for western Australian residents before and after cataract surgery on the first eye.

In Australia and other nations, patients often have to wait months to receive surgery after a cataract is diagnosed. The study argues that this delay significantly impacts not only patients' quality of life, but public safety, health care and property costs as well. The authors say additional research is needed to compare crash rates before and after cataract surgery on patients' second eye.

"The study confirms that cataract surgery is not only clinically safe and effective, but also cost-effective as well," said Dr. Lee Wan, Coastal Eye Medical Director. "And this study only looked at savings from safer driving, which is probably minor compared to the benefits of the improved productivity and quality of life provided by this surgery to so many patients."

Cataracts — which occur when the eye's natural crystalline lens becomes cloudy and opaque and hardens — are the leading cause of vision impairment in older people. By age 60, many people have some lens opacity and by 70, nearly all have a significant cataract in one or both eyes. Surgical removal of cataracts followed by implantation of intraocular lens implants (IOLs) dramatically improves vision for most patients.

This research was presented at last October's Scientific Program of the 2010 American Academy of Ophthalmology-Middle East Africa Council of Ophthalmology joint meeting in Chicago.