



2018 Healthy Living

Cataract surgery brightens your life and vision

by Mike Lange

As the average age of Maine residents creeps upward, it stands to reason that illnesses and disease that are prevalent in older Americans are also increasing.

One of the ailments is cataracts.

A cataract starts out small and at first has little effect on your vision. After a while, you'll notice that objects are blurry or fuzzy.

Average light from the sun or a lamp may start to seem too bright. Driving at night becomes difficult because of the glare from oncoming headlights.

While many people consider poor vision an inevitable fact of aging, today's cataract surgery may be the solution. It's a simple, relatively painless procedure to regain vision.

Like every other ailment, timing is critical when dealing with cataracts.

One of the keys is early detection, according to Joann M. Gagne, the executive director of the Maine Optometric Association. "It's always good to have an annual eye exam at any age, but it's even more critical for seniors," Gagne said. "In addition to cataracts, an optometrist can also detect ailments that are often discovered during a regular routine physical."

For example, if you haven't had a routine checkup in a while, a thorough eye exam can also detect high blood pressure, glaucoma, tumors, macular degeneration and even diabetes, she added.

Today, cataracts affect more than 22 million Americans age 40 and older. And as the U.S. population ages, more than 30 million Americans are expected to have cataracts by the year 2020, according to the Prevent Blindness Association (PBA).

Dr. Gerald Rudmin of Dexter has been a practicing optometrist for 41 years and said that the detection and removal of cataracts have made huge advances.

"Back in the old days when I was just starting optometry practice, cataract surgery was majorly invasive," Rudmin said. "It required a full surgical staff with an anesthesiologist. You needed to stay in the hospital for two weeks with physical immobilization of your head and systemic antibiotics."

Today, cataract surgery "takes less than 20 minutes with two people in the surgical room: the surgeon and one assistant," Rudmin said.

Rudmin also noted that 20-30 years ago, it was common for people to lose their driver's license because of cataracts. "You have to see over the 20/40 threshold to retain your license," he said. "So when a person's visual acuity is worse than that because of a cataract, they won't be able to drive. So we're noticing that younger people are having surgery more often nowadays."

Dr. Jeremy Valentine of Vision Care of Maine agrees that cataract surgery has been "streamlined considerably during the past decade. Years ago, they used to put small sandbags on the patients' eyes after surgery and keep them in the hospital at least overnight."

Today, the procedure "is down to about 20 minutes. Vision Care of Maine is also one of the few providers in the state that offers laser cataract surgery," he said.

Valentine said that cataract surgery has also become more accessible to senior citizens in the state that offers laser cataract surgery. "Also, Medicare will also pay for one pair of eyeglasses or contact lenses after cataract surgery."

"But we're starting to get inquiries from more millennials," Valentine said. "I think they've become more attuned to a healthy lifestyle, so eye care is very high on their priority list."

For more information about eye care in general, visit the Maine Optometric Association website at <http://maine-aoa.org>.

Ophthalmologist, optometrist, and optician

An ophthalmologist is a physician (M.D. or D.O.) who specializes in the medical and surgical care of the eye and visual system.

Ophthalmologists have typically completed four years of college-level premedical education, four years of medical school, and four years of residency training. Some ophthalmologists also complete one or two additional years of fellowship training to focus on a specific subspecialty. Ophthalmologists are licensed by a state regulatory board to practice medicine and surgery.

An ophthalmologist is sometimes confused with the professional titles optometrist and optician.

Optometrists (O.D.) are eye care providers who have completed four years of training at an accredited optometric college to provide primary eye care services, including vision testing as well as the diagnosis and medical treatment of some eye problems.

Opticians are licensed by a separate state regulatory board. Opticians are technicians who are trained to dispense eyeglasses, contact lenses, and other vision aids, using prescriptions provided by ophthalmologists or optometrists. Opticians do not perform eye exams or write prescriptions. (Courtesy of the Maine Society of Eye Physicians and Surgeons)



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Broadband study calls for improved access for senior citizens

MAINE - The long-awaited study on Piscataquis County's broadband needs was formally released last month and presentations have been made to several municipal, county and nonprofit organizations.

The comprehensive study by Axion Technology comes in two parts: the Digital Inclusion and Regional Workforce Plan and the 66-page Regional Technology Plan.

Axion, based in Machias, specializes in delivering broadband services to rural communities. They've designed over 100 access points in 2,500 miles of Maine's most challenging terrain.

One focal point of the Piscataquis County study was how to match up the demographics with the need for high-speed Internet.

The county's population of 17,535 residents has a median age of 48.1 years old; 47 percent of the population is over 50 years old, and 20 percent of the county's population is over 65 years old.

So Axion recommends that Piscataquis County consider "exploring technology tools and offering classes and workshops that will assist their residents to remain in their homes as they become older. Current technology programs available are medication reminders; pill dispensers; health management (monitor blood pressure

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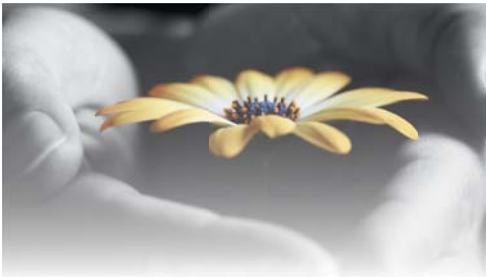
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Starting seeds at home

by Marjorie Peronto, Associate UMaine Extension Professor, and Theresa Guethler, Extension Master Gardener.

MAINE - When you grow your own seedlings, your transplants can be ready for the garden as soon as the danger of spring frost has passed, giving you a head start on Maine's short gardening season.

You can start enjoying flowers and harvesting vegetables four to six weeks earlier than if you had waited for the ground to warm up enough for you to sow the seeds outside.

Using transplants instead of direct-seeding is especially important for plants that take a long time to mature or are sensitive to frost such as tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, and melons.

Some plants — mostly root crops — do not transplant well, or they mature quickly enough that starting seedlings indoors is not necessary. Vegetables that are typically direct-seeded in the garden include beans, beets, carrots, corn, peas, spinach, turnips, and zucchini.

Seeds may be planted in any clean, 2- to 3 1/2-inch deep container with adequate drainage holes. You can use containers made of plastic, compressed peat, or wood, or recycled containers such as the cut-off bottoms of milk jugs.

Using shallow trays or flats sold in garden supply stores saves space when you want to start a lot of a single type of seed. The seedlings will need to be separated and transplanted into containers as they grow. If you want only a small number of plants, skip this step and direct-seed into small individual pots.

Containers that have been previously used for planting should be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected with a solution of one part chlorine bleach to nine parts water. This will help prevent disease.

Seeds should be germinated in a fine-textured soilless mix with no fertilizer. Standard seed-starting mixes include equal parts of peat moss and vermiculite or perlite. You can either buy a seed-starting mix or prepare your own at home.

Soil from your garden is not recommended when germinating seeds in containers—it may contain weed seeds or diseases, and it tends to compact, dry out, and crust over too quickly for fragile seedlings. Once seedlings have emerged and developed one or two sets of true leaves, you can transplant them into a slightly larger container with a coarser seedling-growing mix.

You can figure out when to plant your seeds based on how long the seedlings will take to become mature enough to be transplanted into the garden. Seedlings may take from four to 12 weeks; the amount of time will usually be indicated on the seed package.

To determine when to start seeds indoors, count back from the last spring frost date for your area. Last frost dates for most of Maine are in late May or early June—check with a local nursery.

Some seeds need special treatment before they are ready for germination: be sure to check any instructions on the seed package. Since seeds vary widely in how well they germinate, plan to sow more than you will actually need.

Most seeds need warmth to germinate, usually a soil temperature of 65°F–70°F. Find a warm spot in the house, like on top of a refrigerator or near a wood stove, or use heating cables or mats to help ensure a consistent, warm soil temperature.

Avoid putting the trays into direct sunlight at this time. The soil could get too hot and kill the seeds.

Keep a record of what you plant, when you planted it, when it germinated, and how well it did in the garden, so that you can see whether you need to make changes next year.

As soon as sprouts appear, remove the plastic cover and move the seedlings into bright light. They need 14 to 16 hours per day of natural or fluorescent light to keep from becoming leggy. The growing temperature should be about 55–65 degrees, so avoid drafty windowsills.

Once the second set of true leaves appears, water with a half-strength solution of fertilizer; you can use a water-soluble, all-purpose plant food, either synthetic or organic.

Gradually increase the strength of the solution over time. Water from the bottom or use a very fine sprinkler to avoid damaging the tender seedlings. Do not overwater—this is the most frequent mistake growers make.

A common problem when growing seedlings is damping-off. Infected seedlings develop a dark-colored rot at the base of the stem, then shrivel and fall over. The fungi that cause damping-off thrive in warm, moist soils—the same conditions that seeds need to germinate and grow.

To minimize the risk of damping-off in your seedling trays, use a sterile, well-drained growing medium. Space your seedlings so that air circulates between them, and do not overwater. Do not sprinkle frequently, as it will keep the soil surface too moist and promote fungal growth. Instead, water the seedling trays thoroughly and wait until they are almost dry before you water again.

Seedlings should be thinned to at least one each apart or transplanted into individual pots. When transplanting seedlings, you should handle them by the leaves only. Their stems are very delicate and while a seedling can stand to lose part or all of a leaf, it will not survive with a bruised or broken stem.

Finally, the young plants will need one to two weeks of hardening off before they go into the garden. Hardening off is the process of acclimating plants to outdoor conditions.

Start by setting them outside for a few hours at a time in a protected, semi-shady location, such as on a porch or under a shrub. Outdoor temperatures should be 45 degrees or warmer. Gradually increase the time outdoors and the exposure to direct sunlight. Transplant your seedlings to the garden in the late afternoon, after the heat of the day has subsided—or on a cloudy day—and water them thoroughly.

For more information, visit the UMaine Extension program website at extension.umaine.edu.

Keep Your Heart Healthy With Less Salt

Heart healthy eating – including limiting your daily salt intake – helps manage high blood pressure and may lower overall risk for heart disease. That's according to Whitney Gould-Cookson, Clinical Dietician for Mayo Regional Hospital, who helps her clients find ways to improve their diets for better health.

Gould-Cookson urges everyone to reduce their intake of salt. "Sodium (salt) helps the body hold extra fluid, which makes the heart work harder," she says. The American Heart Association recommends no more than 2,300 milligrams (mgs) of salt a day and an ideal limit of no more than 1,500 mg per day for most adults. "Because the average American's sodium intake is so excessive, even cutting back to no more than 2,400 milligrams a day will significantly improve blood pressure and heart health," according to the AMA's website.

The biggest high-sodium culprits are processed and pre-packaged foods. "Sodium does not just come from the salt shaker – it is hiding in most of our processed foods, canned foods, condiments and sauces," says Gould-Cookson. She recommends that people read nutrition labels and "take caution" when the sodium content is greater than 300 mg per serving.

You can also make great tasting salt-free seasonings at home by blending sodium-free herbs and spices. An easy one to try is the "No-Salt Sloppy Joe Mix" from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Lancaster County Extension: Just put together 1 tablespoon of dried minced onion, ¼ teaspoon of garlic powder, ½ tsp of dry mustard, ½ tsp of chili powder, and a ¼ tsp ground black pepper. Mix into 1 pound of cooked ground beef or turkey, and simmer with 1 cup of salt-free ketchup and ½ cup of water for 10 minutes for a terrific low-salt meal that everyone – including your heart! – will love. To see the complete recipe and other tips for eating less salt, visit www.healthypiscataquis.com/blog or email info@pfsoodcenter.org.

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pulse, heartbeat, blood glucose levels); nutrition guides; fitness tools; and brain games. Also available are home monitoring systems; personal emergency response systems; and GPS tracking systems.

A "Shared Community Health Needs Assessment," published in 2016, is a comprehensive review of health data and community stakeholder input on a broad set of health issues.

It states that access to health care in Piscataquis County is lower than the state, specifically, a lower percentage of residents have health insurance and a higher proportion report a lack of care due to cost.

Although this report does not specifically focus on residents over 65 years of age, it does report that cancer rates in Piscataquis County are similar to the state and cancer is the leading cause of death in the county.

Cardiovascular disease is also a concern with rates of hospitalizations for heart attack and stroke, and mortality rates for acute myocardial infarction and coronary heart disease, significantly higher than the state.

In addition, a study by the Maske School of Public Service, University of Southern Maine stated, "that within Maine, the growth in Maine's elderly population will not occur evenly, with the result that some parts of Maine will be distinctly older than others."

These areas with a disproportionate elder population should be addressing the specific needs of this particular population.

Adult Education and Training Center's "National Digital Equity Center" (NDEC) can provide training to Piscataquis County's senior population and to family members to leverage available technology," according to the broadband study.

"The senior citizen and the family member can learn firsthand how to use the online monitoring systems or even use something as basic as an iPad for communicating and visual check-ins," the study continues. "Patients can connect to providers for care and support via videoconferencing (telehealth), as well as including family members to actively participate in the care of a loved one."

Finally, the key to the success of the program is finding collaborating partners. Among potential partners listed in the study are:

- Eastern Area Agency on Aging www.eaaa.org
- Penquis www.penquis.org
- Mayo Regional Hospital www.mayorhosp.com
- Pine Tree Hospice www.pinetreehospice.org
- VNA Home Health Hospices <http://vnahomehealth.org>
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