

Retinal Artery Obstruction

What Is It?

You have been diagnosed with a retinal artery obstruction. The loss of vision which you have experienced is the result of a blockage in blood flow to the retina which is located in the back of the eye. That part of the retina which has lost its blood supply abruptly stops functioning and results in visual impairment. Depending on the extent and location of the retina affected, the loss of vision may be relatively mild or very severe. This problem, in effect, is like a stroke of the eye.

Is There Treatment?

There is no treatment which has been shown to be helpful restoring blood flow and improving vision. Sometimes there will be limited, spontaneous improvement in vision, but if this is going to occur, it will be apparent within the few days after the blockage develops.

Can It Worsen?

Sometimes patients with a retinal artery obstruction develop a severe form of glaucoma which can cause complete loss of vision and the eye to be red and painful. Although uncommon, this glaucoma is often very severe. Usually, warning signs will develop within the eye before the glaucoma sets in. You will need to be checked carefully for the first few months after the retinal artery obstruction to look for these warning signs. If they should develop, your doctor may recommend a laser treatment to try and prevent severe glaucoma. Please understand the laser treatment does not help to improve vision, but rather, reduces the risk of developing the glaucoma. These warning signs are usually without symptoms, and it is critical that close, careful follow-up be maintained.

Is Further Testing Required?

In general, patients with either a “center” (i.e. main artery) or “branch” retinal artery obstruction require an evaluation to look for a source for the blockage. Often the blockage is the result of atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries) with a fragment of cholesterol or clot breaking off from a larger artery elsewhere in the body such as in the neck or heart and floating downstream until it obstructs a smaller artery in the eye.

An evaluation by your general medical doctor or cardiologist is recommended to try to identify the source. Blood tests or other diagnostic tests such as an ultrasound of the heart and neck may be appropriate. Sometimes a blood thinning medication such as aspirin, Plavix, or Coumadin is prescribed to reduce the risk of new clots and blockages. This does not help to improve the sight in the affected eye but could have a long-term benefit for your general health.

If you have additional questions or concerns, please ask the doctor or a member of our staff.