

SEEING 20/20 OPTIONS WHEN YOUR ARMS AREN'T LONG ENOUGH

By Mali Lim
CORRESPONDENT

IT

happens to everyone sooner or later: you find yourself adjusting the distance of your dinner menu, or squinting to read the sports score

on your TV, and reluctantly you admit it's time for an eye exam – and possibly some form of vision correction.

Like wrinkles and gray hair, vision problems a natural part of the aging process, explains Dr. Tim Lynch, optometrist and owner of the Mansfield Eye Center. Even those lucky enough to have enjoyed perfect vision all their lives eventually find their eyes lose their ability to focus as they grow older.

Gerry Goetz, optician and co-owner of Westford Valley Eye Care, concurs, adding that “people typically start seeing changes around their mid-40s, but they tend to hold off getting exams, and buy over-the-counter magnifiers at first, until their mid- to late-40s when they start needing reading glasses.”

Fortunately, there is a wealth of choices and technological advances available for those who need vision correction, ranging from simple solutions such as eyeglasses and contact lenses to more radical procedures such as LASIK surgery or prescription lens implants.

Eyeglasses can be just as much a fashion statement as a method of vision correction, with most optical centers and dispensing opticians providing a wide selection of designer frames and specialized lenses to fit any lifestyle.

“You can get everything to big and bold, colorful frames to light-weight rimless frames,” says optician Steve Michaels, owner of The Optical Place in Sudbury. Long gone, too, are the thick, heavy “Coke-bottle” glasses that characterized the high index lenses of strong prescriptions – replaced years ago with light plastic polycarbonate lenses.

“In fact, we’ve gone three steps past polycarbonates, and people with strong prescriptions have lots of options with even thinner lenses than before,” Michaels says.

A dispensing optician, Michaels advises clients on the appropriate frames that will work well with their particular lens prescriptions.

“Some people just need straight reading glasses, while some people need glasses that lengthen the focal length a little,” Michaels says. “Painters and musicians, for example, need to be able to focus further away and a reading glass may be too close.

Presbyopia, a condition in which the natural lens of the eye begins to lose its flexibility, typically develops in everyone by the mid- to late-40s, making it difficult to focus on near points, hence the tendency to hold books, newspapers or menus at arm's

length in order to focus properly. Traditionally, the most common cure for presbyopia was bifocals, eyeglasses with two spliced lenses: a regular prescription lens for nearsightedness or farsightedness set above, and a second, stronger prescription lens for reading and other close work beneath.

According to Goetz and Michaels, however, bifocals are no longer recommended for clients with presbyopia, as they are considered outdated technology.

“Benjamin Franklin invented the bifocal, which shows you how old they are,” Michaels points out.

Instead, there is a new technology called a “progressive lens,” sometimes erroneously called an “invisible bifocal,” manufactured for people with those special needs.

“It gives you distance, intermediate and near vision all in one lens, with no line, creating an effect close to natural vision,” Goetz says.

Progressive lenses provide the intermediate distance needed to work on computers, while also offering far distance for driving and near distance for reading without the visible lines that were obvious in old-fashioned bifocals.

Besides the advances in lenses and lens materials, there are also special anti-reflective coatings available for eyeglasses, which many opticians recommend for nighttime driving.

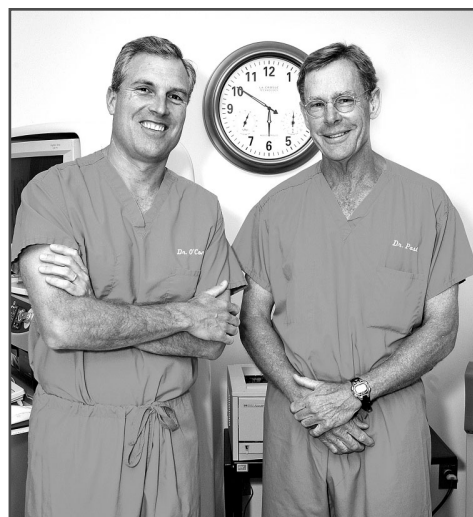


PHOTO COURTESY OF
POST, O'CONNOR & KADRMAS EYE CENTERS

Daniel O'Connor, M.D. and Charles Post Jr., M.D., are cataract, laser and refractive surgeons at Post, O'Connor & Kadrmas Eye Centers in Plymouth, Wareham, Middleboro, Mashpee and Dennis.

“As we get older, our eyes get more sensitive to light,” Goetz explains. “It's common to develop sensitivity to glare, especially around car headlights, which is why many older people stop driving at night.”

Anti-reflective coatings can help with nighttime driving while polarized lenses for sunglasses and prescription eyeglasses are just as vital to protect eyes from ultraviolet rays during the day in order to slow down the development of cataracts and to prevent macular degeneration.

For folks who want to avoid eyeglasses, perhaps because they ski, or play other sports, or who simply don't want to wear glasses when they go someplace special, contact lenses are an excellent alternative. If you've always been curious about contacts, however, technological advances have made contact lens use even easier than ever.

“Contact lenses are appropriate at any age,” Goetz says. “We've had people who have never used contact lenses try them out in their 50s and 60s.”

Soft lenses have long replaced the hard lenses and gas permeable lenses, even for people with astigmatism – and there are even soft lenses that can correct astigmatism. Contact lenses come in single use, daily wear and extended wear varieties and can even come in bifocal varieties.

A growing number of patients needing vision correction are also exploring the option of refractive surgery, in which the

shape of the eye's cornea is altered in order to change its focusing power. Although LASIK (the acronym for *laser in situ keratotomy*) is the most well-known type of refractive surgery, radial keratotomy (RK) and photorefractive keratectomy (PRK), which use either surgical tools or lasers, respectively, to sculpt and reshape the cornea, are also potential methods of changing the focusing power of the eye. Another type of refractive surgery includes thermokeratoplasty, which uses heat from a laser to reshape the cornea, and there are even special contact lenses that can be used to temporarily reshape the cornea (orthokeratology).

Refractive surgery, of course, is not for everyone, and, as with any medical procedure, there is always an element of risk involved. According to the Food and Drug Administration, the corrective results can diminish with age, especially in patients with farsightedness, and there is a percentage of patients who find their vision worse than before their surgery.

Lynch cautions that for many patients over the age of 55, the drawbacks of LASIK surgery can outweigh the benefits.

“Laser surgery just treats the surface of the eye and as you age, you'll still lose your focusing ability,” he explains.

In addition, laser surgery doesn't slow down the development of cataracts, which, according to Lynch, happens to everyone as they age.

Cataracts, the clouding of the crystalline lens of the eye or its envelope, develop in everyone sooner or later, and eventually affect vision, Lynch says. “The average age where cataract surgery is required is 72, although you may see early signs – blurred vision, glare from lights, etc. – in the mid-50s.”

“Pretty much between the ages of 50 to 55, there may not be any benefit to LASIK as you'll have cataracts developing,” Lynch says.

An alternative to laser surgery is to have a lens implant, before one even develops cataracts.

“The procedure involves removing the natural lens in the eye and putting a plastic lens implant in its place,” Lynch explains. “You can actually have lens implants that have focusing ability to them, and this lens can also be a prescription lens, just like glasses, even with options like bifocal capabilities.”

Regardless of which vision correction option you choose, whether it's eyeglasses and contact lenses or full-blown surgery, it is important to discuss choices with your eye doctor – and more importantly, to adhere to a yearly exam schedule with a qualified professional. Regular checkups and prompt attention to changes in your vision can go a long way to keeping your eyes healthy for many more years to come.

RESOURCES

MANSFIELD EYE CENTER
1 North Main St., Mansfield
508-339-7600
www.mansfeldeye.com

THE OPTICAL PLACE
215 Boston Post Road, Sudbury
978-443-2020
www.theopticalplace.com

WESTFORD VALLEY EYE CARE
160 Littleton Road, Westford
978-692-7575
www.westfordvalleyeyecare.com

For more information on LASIK and other surgeries, visit the Food and Drug Administration Web site at www.fda.gov/cdrh/lasik/what.htm

