A farsighted move

Newest thing in eye surgery can help Boomers ditch the reading glasses

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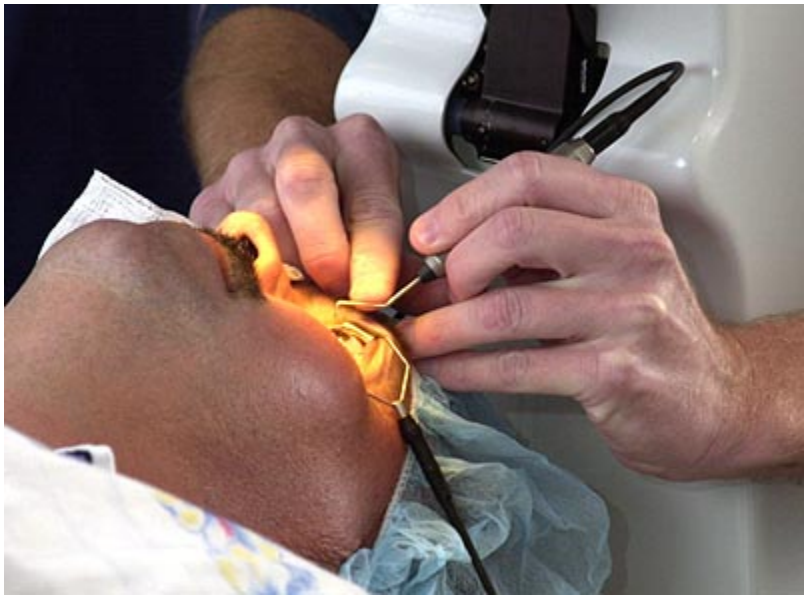
David Charles, 48, is ready to throw away his glasses.

Like many Baby Boomers, Charles has worn them since he was 40 to correct the age-related, progressive farsightedness that drives even the most vain to don reading glasses to see a menu or newspaper.



Dr. Tipton McKnight performs conductive keratoplasty eye surgery on Chip Colley to correct his farsightedness at The Center For Sight on North Davis Highway.

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Now, doctors have introduced a new procedure designed specifically to treat this condition. Unlike laser treatments used primarily on nearsighted patients, conductive keratoplasty uses minimally invasive radiofrequency energy.

Charles was one of the area's first patients in the last week to have gotten the new procedure at Pensacola's Center for Sight, one of only 50 U.S. sites where Refractec Inc.'s ViewPoint CK System is in place. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved the procedure in April and so far about 1,000 people nationwide have stepped forward to give it a try.

Charles works installing floor covering, making good vision vital to his job. He first noticed his vision was diminishing when he had trouble matching seams.

But his glasses are both a curse and a blessing.

"I work a lot on my hands and knees," Charles said. "When I sweat, which I sometimes do, it puddles up on my glasses. That's a pain in the neck."

In a few weeks, when the treatment's full potential is realized, he should be able to put his glasses aside.

"I'll feel naked in the morning," he said, laughing. "It will be nice to be able to shave without putting on my glasses."

While some forms of laser surgery have been adapted to treat farsightedness, conductive keratoplasty is less invasive and will be an option for more patients, said Ron Martin, Center for Sight administrator.

"Anyone over 40 and under 70 is a prime candidate," Martin said. "People who started wearing glasses about the time they reached 40 are possible candidates for this."

The cost is about $1,800 per eye, which is comparable to laser procedures; most insurance will not cover it.

Conductive keratoplasty changes the shape of the cornea using a controlled release of radiofrequency energy to heat and shrink tissue around the cornea's perimeter. This band of tissue cinches the edge of the cornea, making its curves steeper and its center thicker.

Patients are given a thorough examination and have a precise measurement of their prescription taken to ensure they are good candidates.

After application of an anesthetic eye drops, the doctor applies radiofrequency energy in a circular pattern along the periphery of the cornea, which minimizes interference with the line of sight.
The small, pen-shaped instrument has a tip as thin as a human hair that penetrates the cornea about 0.45 mm - or less than 1/50 of an inch. The doctor zaps between eight and 32 spots along the edge of the cornea, depending on the amount of correction needed.

Drs. Tipton McKnight and Robert Harbour have been through training and have performed the new treatment at the Center for Sight.

Patients may have some minor discomfort during the first 24 hours, experiencing something similar to having sand or a particle in their eyes, Martin said. Vision improves gradually during the three weeks following surgery and patients see the final results at that time.

Because age-related farsightedness is progressive, patients may eventually need to have additional adjustments made in following years.

Most of the complications associated with laser procedures involve the surgical flap need to perform the operations, said Fort Lauderdale ophthalmologist Wayne Bizer, spokesman for the American Academy of Ophthalmology.

But because this procedure does not create a flap, risks are much lower. More than 400 patients had the procedure as a part of the FDA approval process, with no serious complications, Bizer said.

"There was some over-correction or under-correction," he said. "And it can induce astigmatism, which is warped or uneven refraction. But in most cases as the eye heals, it goes away."

Other infrequently occuring side effects include seeing "halos" and problems with night vision.

Pensacola patient Charles Colley, who had the procedure on the first day it was offered, Aug. 9, said he noticed a difference immediately - one eye was noticeably better before the doctor even started the other.

Colley, 47, said that after 10 years of wearing glasses he was excited to hear about a procedure that could correct his vision, and did a lot of research before signing up.

"There was no pain at all," he said, following the seven minutes of surgery. "It seemed like when I was still on the table I could see better."

Who's it for?

Candidates for conductive keratoplasty must be over 40 years of age and have farsightedness between +0.75 to +3.00 diopters.

Candidates cannot be pregnant or nursing. They also must NOT have had:

Previous vision surgery.

Significant changes in vision for one year.

Any chronic eye disorders.

Any chronic illness or disease.

Why do we become farsighted?

Farsightedness affects 27 percent of the non-Asian population, and at a much lower rate in the Asian population.

Those affected may see objects that are far away, but have difficulty focusing on near objects. You may also find that you can see things clearly, but have to strain your eyes to maintain focus.

Farsightedness occurs when the eyeball is too short or the cornea is too flat. When light enters a short eyeball, it is focused behind the retina instead of directly on the retina, where light must be directed for normal vision. Because of this, the focusing apparatus of the eye must constantly work to compensate and focus images.