

Getting a good look

Newer surgeries, lenses can make a world of difference for cataract patients.

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As baby boomers have grown older, doctors are seeing more patients with cataracts. By age 65, half the population has a cataract, a clouding of the natural lens inside the eye. Left untreated, it can cause blindness.

Typically, a person with cataracts will find vision becoming cloudy and night vision decreasing, especially when driving. Halos around lights at night, colors faded and sensitivity to bright light all are symptoms.

Until she had cataract surgery in August, Carol Niebes, 66, of Painesville thought the carpeting in her house was beige.

"I moved into this place a year and a half ago and had no idea the carpeting was actually white," she said. "Since my cataract surgery, I'm seeing a whole different world."

Ophthalmologist Dr. Michael Rom said Niebes and others who have cataract surgery now have a variety of choices in how they want to see after the surgery.

With his Insight Eye Centers in Mentor and Chardon, Dr. Rom has performed more than 12,000 such surgeries during his 14 years in practice.

"In the old days — before lens implants — once cataracts were removed, the only option was to have very thick glasses," Dr. Rom said.

But these days, microsurgi-

cal techniques allow an artificial lens to be placed inside the eye to take the place of the cloudy human lens that's removed.

"People can choose whether they want to wear reading glasses or not or whether they want to see distances without glasses," Dr. Rom said. "Or they can choose to see both distance and close-up without glasses.

It's a lifestyle choice," he said.

He posts a lifestyle questionnaire on his Web site to help patients decide what's right for them. It's at www.insighteye-center.com.

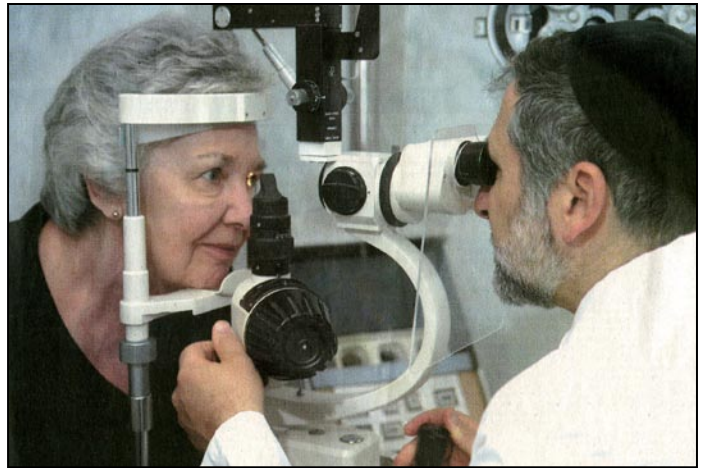
A new accommodative lens called Crystalens uses the eye's natural focusing ability, according to the Bausch & Lomb Web site at www.crystalens.com.

The catch is most health insurance plans and Medicare cover just the basic surgery, not the accommodative lens implant, which can cost up to \$2,100 for each eye.

"I am a widow and am not a wealthy woman, so I really thought about it," Niebes said.

"But to me it's really been worth it. I've worn glasses since I was 10, and for quite awhile I had to change my prescription a couple times a year."

She was due to renew her driver's license and suspected she would no longer be able to pass the eye test. So she took the plunge and scheduled cataract surgery for both eyes on two different dates in August.



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Dr. Micheal Rom gives patient Carol Niebes a follow-up examination after Niebes' recent cataract surgery and lens implant.

"Now for the first time in my life I can read the fine print and see road signs 24/7 — and without wearing sunglasses," she said.

"It's unbelievably liberating."

The surgery itself is done on an outpatient basis, and the results are immediate, Dr. Rom said. The new lens — and the new vision it brings — also lasts a lifetime.

"The surgery itself takes about 10 minutes," he said. "I numb the eye with drops and then, working with a microscope and a diamond knife, I make a tiny opening on the cornea. (The eye) has no blood vessels, so there is no bleeding.

"I insert a tube containing ultrasound energy that emulsifies the lens into a liquid, which I vacuum out. Then I insert the folded implant into

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the same tiny opening and unfold in place.

"The incision is so tiny it heals itself."

Because the patient is sedated for the procedure, he or she is not able to drive home. But the patient is typically back at home within two hours, he said.

"I had to put drops in my eyes, but the recovery was very manageable," Niebes said. "I was back at work the same day.

"I just never realized what I wasn't seeing."