

# a vision of cool

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**IT'S THE DREADED MIDDLE-AGE BENCHMARK** that many baby boomers put off as long as possible: the moment when necessity finally conquers vanity and a pair of glasses perches itself atop your nose.

For members of the generation that embodied the words cool and hip, succumbing to the need for vision correction—which is, for many, decidedly uncool—can be particularly challenging.

Some make the best of their new life in glasses by selecting colorful or uniquely shaped frames that show that imperfect vision can still be perfectly cool.

Others, however, may seek a more permanent solution that avoids the entire glasses-conundrum altogether: laser vision-correction procedures.

Both **Dr. Denise Visco** and **Dr. Geoffrey Brent**, practicing ophthalmologists in Central

Pennsylvania, see a lot of boomer-age patients willing to undergo vision-correction surgery in order to simplify their lives.

“Laser vision correction is the most studied procedure in the United States and has the highest satisfaction rate of any cosmetic procedure performed,” Visco said. Several million procedures have been performed over the last decade and the FDA has received fewer than 150 complaints. And it usually doesn’t take much to be a good candidate for vision-correction procedures: Healthy eyes and a stable prescription normally give you the green light.

Though many cringe at the thought of a procedure performed on our sensitive eyes, the surgery itself isn’t painful. At most practices, patients are given a light sedative before the operation. “We find that it works very well,” said Visco. “If you are a rare or occasional drinker of beer or wine, it’s like having one to two glasses. Most people are very comfortable yet still alert enough that they can fixate on the eye tracker.” The eyes are then numbed with drops and the whole procedure only takes 10 to 15 minutes.



**Dr. Denise Visco, above left, in her operating room. Above right, Visco uses a model eye to explain the different approaches to laser vision surgery.**

## Letters and Lasers

The most common options for vision-correction surgery include photorefractive keratectomy, or PRK; laser epithelial keratomileusis, or LASEK; laser-assisted *in situ* keratomileusis, or LASIK; and PRELEX, or presbyopia lens exchange, where the eye’s lens is replaced by an intraocular lens implant. The trick to figuring out which procedure might be right for you lies in learning the differences, benefits, and drawbacks of each type of vision correction.

LASEK and PRK are both surface treatments. The epithelium—the layer of surface cells on the cornea—is removed using a laser so that the corrective beam can get to the stroma, or the central layer of the eye that gives your vision its clarity. PRK, the original eye surgery, has been around since the 1980s and was

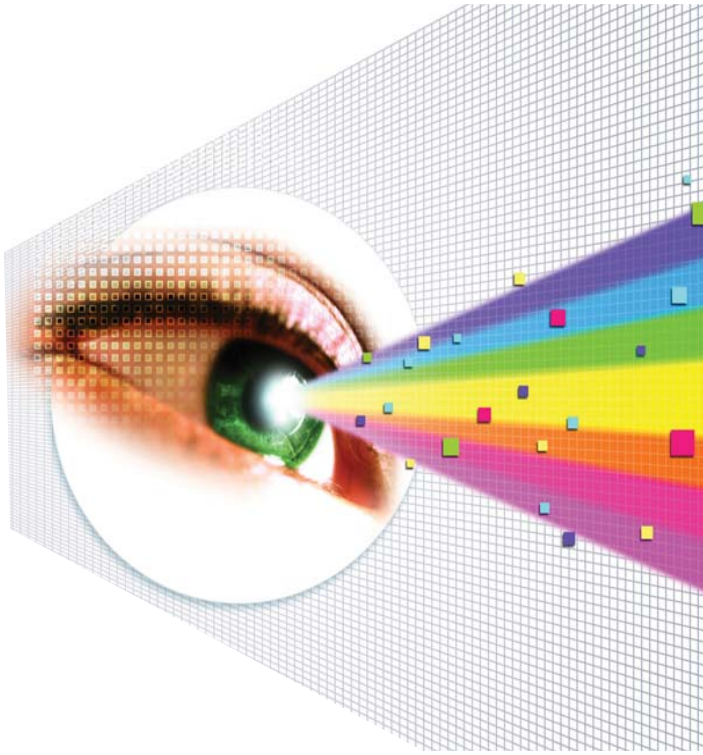
approved by the FDA in 1995. A laser is used to reshape the cornea: steeper for farsighted patients and flatter for those with nearsightedness.

“All the basic science that those [procedures] are based on goes back to procedures performed in the ‘50s and ‘60s. The biggest thing has been the fine-tuning of the laser and the way it does the treatments,” Brent said.

LASEK is a newer variation of PRK and differs in that it preserves that thin epithelial layer by lifting it from the eye’s surface before the laser is applied. Afterward, the epithelium is placed back on the eye’s surface to heal.

With LASIK, a thin flap is cut into the eye’s surface and then lifted. The laser is applied for reshaping, and then the flap is replaced and serves as a kind of natural bandage. Not surprisingly, this heals more quickly than waiting for the epithelial surface layer to regrow, as is the case with PRK or LASEK.

*please turn over*



If your vision has only become problematic for tasks like reading, you've likely developed presbyopia, which is a normal part of the aging process. Around age 40, the eye's lens starts to lose its flexibility and becomes more rigid, making detail work more visually difficult.

"Many patients, if they're wearing glasses for distance, get the procedure because they don't want to wear bifocals," said Visco. "We see a lot of baby boomers because they get frustrated with how complicated their vision becomes once they need the reading glasses on top of everything else."

PRELEX removes the lens and replaces it with a deluxe intraocular lens that can function for both distance vision and reading ability. Implant procedures are more invasive than other laser-vision options, and therefore carry more risk.

"The newer multifocal lens implants allow people to see far away and up close with minimal need for glasses," Brent said. "If someone's goal is to get rid of their glasses altogether, that might be a better option if they're 50 or older."

### Pluses and Minuses

The pros and cons of all vision-correction surgeries can be lumped into two categories: healing time and potential complications.

A possible side effect of all vision-correction surgery is the occurrence of halos—the glare around lights that patients sometimes experience during nighttime driving. But Visco estimated that only about 2 to 5 percent of patients will be permanently affected by halos, and for many of those, the problem doesn't prevent them from driving at night.

No matter which procedure you choose, the turnaround time for recovery is admirably short in most cases, but even more so for LASIK, which explains its popularity. If the surgery is performed on a Thursday morning, for example, most LASIK patients can return to work Friday afternoon. What sets LASIK apart from PRK and LASEK is the flap that is made—that sliver of corneal tissue that's lifted up so that the laser can do its work underneath.

"Many baby boomers do like the LASIK procedure because it gives them faster healing," noted Visco. "They're busy people, they're in the peak of their career, and they usually have a very tight schedule, so they like that fast healing time."

"With LASIK, the eyes may feel a little scratchy for a few days, but within 24 hours patients are feeling pretty much back to normal," Brent said. "With surface treatments, usually for the first three to six days the eyes are more uncomfortable."

With surface procedures, patients will see well right after the surgery, but their vision will soon deteriorate for a few days before it clears again, and protective bandages and contact lenses must be worn during that time. Patients must also return for more frequent checkups than with LASIK surgery.

Though LASIK's flap is its biggest advantage, it is also the biggest source of possible complication. Cutting a flap severs more of the nerves in the corners of the eyes, which often leads to dry eye and patients' increased need to lubricate their eyes with drops. "Eyes will always be more dry after laser vision correction of any kind," Visco said, but added that only 3 percent of patients will have issues with dry eye severe enough to require daily lubrication.

In less than 1 percent of cases, scar tissue or inflammation that collects underneath the flap during the healing process may need to be cleaned out. And folds or wrinkles in the flap can occur if a patient experiences a serious blow to the eye during the first month or so after surgery.

Brent said his best chance of having satisfied patients comes from figuring out before any surgery is performed just whom he'll be able to satisfy. "[It's about] making sure people are good candidates for whatever technology we have and that people have real expectations of what we can and can't accomplish," he said.

Though coverage varies by provider, vision-correction surgery is considered a cosmetic procedure and therefore is not usually covered by insurance. So the out-of-pocket expense can be discouraging, but for a lot of baby boomers, entering the second phase of their lives with significantly improved vision is worth the cost. And once they've dodged the "uncool bullet" that their vision problem presented, Visco said she often sees patients' overall "coolness" increase in other ways, too.

"It's fun because the procedure is life-changing," she said. "Things like this change how people feel about themselves and it creates a new self-image for them. They'll come in and their hair will be different, they dress differently, they carry themselves differently. It's fun to be part of that process that empowers people."