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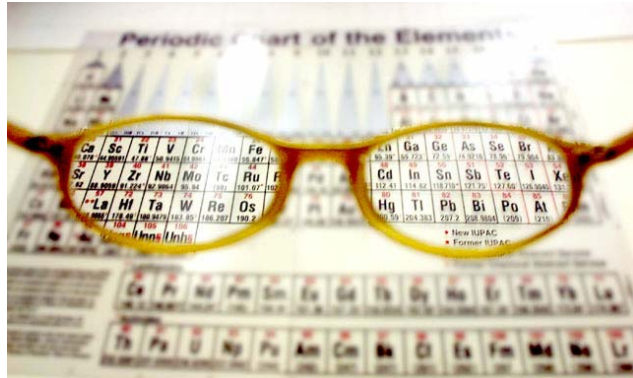
Thursday March 11, 2004

Unobstructed views

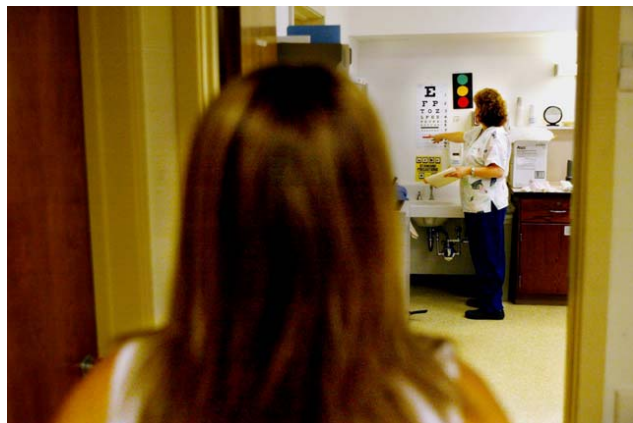
Students can protect against poor eyesight with diet, rest, LASIK

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Krysten Kellum / Aggie photo illustration



Daniel Krompholz / Aggie

Patient Victoria Eberlee (front) reads off of the Shellen Vision Chart. Her eye exam was held in the same-day appointments area in the Cowell Student Health Center on Monday.

By ROBERT HUBBARD
Aggie Features Writer

If you have trouble reading small print or see flashes of light while nose-deep in your books during finals week, then you may soon join over 160 million Americans that wear corrective lenses.

Blurred vision may be caused by eye conditions known as refractive errors, which are the leading vision defects in people in their adolescence to late 20s - the age range of most college students.

Fortunately, there are techniques students can employ to avoid eye strain, along with surgical innovations that can correct poor eyesight.

Age has a great deal to do with vision because as a person ages the muscles in their cornea - the front part of the eye where the lens is located - become weaker.

"The young eye has a very strong capability of changing the focus. This is called accommodation," said Davis optometrist Milton Blackman. "People who are farsighted have to exert this; it is just that their ability to compensate for it is much greater in youth than at age 45."

The deterioration of vision quality levels off at around 30. At this point, refractive errors become much less common, conditions stabilize and the eye generally remains healthy. At around age 40 to 45 the years begin to take a toll on everyone's eyes.

"Everybody in their early to mid 40s, they lose the ability to focus up close, then here is where reading glasses are necessary...even if you have no vision problems at all you can be certain at age 40 [and beyond] you are going to need at least reading glasses," Blackman said.

Young people generally do not suffer from eye diseases such as glaucoma, cataracts or macular degeneration. These types of conditions become more frequent after the age of 55 or 60.

Rest your eyes

Virtually nothing can be done to prevent refractive errors, but those with eye conditions can practice resting their exercised eyes.

Staring at a computer screen for hours on end and reading in low light may tire eyes or headaches. However, neither of these activities will increase the risk of refractive errors or eye disease.

"As a rule, improper use of eyes will not hurt your eyes, but may make your eyes hurt," Blackman said.

Computer screens don't have the same resolution as the printed page, according to Blackman, so the feeling of tired eyes and a pounding head

comes from the eye working to adjust to the screen. Staring at a computer screen for more than eight hours a day may cause symptoms of eye strain.

Taking frequent rest breaks, at least five minutes every hour when reading or doing any intense visual activity, can help ease the strain on your eyes. An activity as simple as watching TV, if it is at least 15 feet away, can help tired eyes.

When people don't wear eyeglasses for an extended period of time, it may seem as if their vision is getting better; in fact, nothing has really changed. What instead happens is that the eyes lose their point of reference. Continuing to use the eyes without the aid of corrective lenses causes a person to lose perspective on what good vision actually is.

Certain foods are especially effective at safeguarding against eye disease. These include carotenoid foods, or the brightly colored fruits and vegetables that are rich in antioxidant vitamins. Oranges, watermelon, squash, dark green vegetables like broccoli and leafy green vegetables like spinach are also all good carotinoids.

Squint no more

The most common method of correcting refractive errors is through the use of corrective lenses such as eyeglasses or contact lenses.

Eyewear is generally quite expensive. Eyeglasses tend to be a little sharper than contacts but can cost anywhere from \$100 to \$500, depending on the frame and thickness of the lenses.

Despite the cost, glasses appeal to students trying to make a fashion statement.

"It's fun getting new glasses; it's like getting jewelry for me," said sophomore Courtney Young. "It's sort of another way of expressing myself. I don't know if I want to get [LASIK] because I like wearing glasses. Sometimes it feels like I'm not me if I don't have my glasses on."

Contact lenses come in two forms: hard and soft. Hard lenses are more expensive than soft lenses, but are more durable and don't need to be replaced as frequently.

The latest innovation, laser eye surgery, can also correct refractive errors. These procedures are relatively inexpensive, although laser surgery is not covered by most insurance policies. For a quality procedure by a competent surgeon, you can expect to pay around \$2,000 per eye.

"These revolutionary techniques improve the eye's natural focus by changing the shape of the cornea in various ways, reducing or correcting refractive errors and potentially lessening your dependence on glasses and contacts," according to the UC Davis Vision Correction Service website, a clinic in the ophthalmology department at the UCD Medical School which offers these surgical procedures.

For those that pursue laser surgery there are three major types of surgery to choose from: Photorefractive Keratectomy (PRK), which uses an intense ultraviolet light to vaporize corneal tissue; Radial and Astigmatic Keratotomy (RK/AK), which makes fine incisions to change the shape of the eye; and the most widely known and common, Laser-assisted in-situ Keratomileusis (LASIK), which uses a laser to sculpt the cornea.

Aside from the cosmetic appeal of going without glasses, surgery can repair damaged eyes. LASIK may help UCD senior Henry Li, who suffered trauma to his left eye in a softball game. His left eye is now permanently dilated, and he fears surgery won't help his condition.

Laser surgeries take very little time. LASIK procedures only take around 15 minutes to be completed.

LASIK is the preferred option for those who have moderate and high degrees of myopia and astigmatism, since it usually involves fewer risks such as infection or perforation and the recovery process after the surgery is faster and involves less discomfort. Patients who undergo LASIK surgery are fit to go to work the next day.

"Both LASIK and PRK can provide excellent results. LASIK offers the advantage of quicker healing, less pain, less regression of effect (more stable results), and lower incidence of corneal scarring," according to the Laser Eye Center of Silicon Valley website, a major laser surgery center headed by Dr. Gary Kawesch.

Before having any of the refractive surgeries done, a patient should make sure they are seeing a competent optometrist who is proficient in all of the treatments for refractive errors. Numerous malpractice cases have been filed against doctors who caused scarring or serious vision problems in their patients.

"Experience is critical. Most surgeons with thousands of case experiences have the skill and surgical judgment necessary to obtain optimal results. Surgeons with this level of experience charge more for experience..Most discount centers save money by hiring doctors with very little experience," according to the Laser Eye Center.

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