What Patients Know About Presbyopia

By Frank Celia, contributing writer

Most people know that at some point as they approach middle age they will need “reading glasses.” But understanding the nature of presbyopia tends to end there. The majority have never heard the term presbyopia, don’t know its cause, or don’t know anything about correction options. Like so many aspects of aging, the human inclination is to avoid gazing too deeply into the unsavory details before absolutely necessary.

This lack of awareness puts a greater responsibility on eye care practitioners, who not only have to correct the problem but demystify it as well. Nevertheless, experts note, with today’s advanced multifocal contact lenses, the additional effort can produce exceptional rewards: happier patients with better vision and a long term incremental revenue stream.

The following article, drawn from comments made at an international gathering of leading eye care professionals and also from a leading lens manufacturer’s survey,1 offers sound advice on the education and management of today’s presbyopic patient.

Education

Among patients between the ages of 40 and 55, fewer than 20 percent say their eye care practitioner uses the term “presbyopia.” Least likely to know the term are emmetropes, perhaps the most challenging presbyopic patients. With so little indigenous knowledge out there, patients must look to their eye care providers to keep them informed about normal aging visual changes and what they can expect in the future.

Explaining the problem succinctly requires some skill. Some practitioners use the analogy that the eye’s focusing mechanism is aging in the same way as ligaments and tendons elsewhere in the body, rendering it less resilient than it once was. However, this description may give rise to the misconception that eyes can be exercised “back into shape.” This misunderstanding can make patients vulnerable to questionable sales schemes involving predatory pseudoscience and inter-net quackery.

Other more effective explanations stress the waning flexibility and thickness of the eye’s crystalline lens. Patients are told that there is nothing wrong with their eyes—it is a normal part of aging, but they are also told their vision will not improve. Many offices provide pamphlets on the topic for patients to take home. This helps reinforce information discussed during the exam and provides a reminder for anything patients forget.

Many practitioners agree that presbyopic contact lens education should begin before the condition adversely affects vision. In this way, patients know what to expect and recognize when their vision will change and what it means. Also, keep in mind that following onset of presbyopia, consistent reminders to the patient of the different correction options might be necessary. You might discuss various options at every annual exam for five years before you hit upon an appropriate solution.

Multifocal Contact Lenses

As was discussed above, awareness of presbyopia is low and awareness of multifocal contact lenses is significantly lower, even among long-term contact lens wearers. Emmetropes in fact, are particularly unaware.

However, once aware of multifocal lenses, presbyopes exhibit a keen interest in learning more. In fact, one third of presbyopes said they would likely switch to another practitioner if their current one failed to mention multifocal contact lenses.1

A big part of educating patients about presbyopic vision correction is explaining the term “multifocal.” Due to increased advertising from manufacturers, the term is becoming more familiar. But patients may still ask for bifocal contact lenses. Once you explain how multifocal lenses work—that there are more than two zones of vision—the word multifocal should seem more appropriate.

Some eye care practitioners report they seldom recommend specialized lenses to non-contact lens wearers. However, this could be a missed opportunity. Emmetropes are a challenge, to be sure—but remember, these patients are highly motivated to stay free of reading glasses. Often they signal their reluctance to wear spectacles by inquiring if refractive surgery can “cure” presbyopia.

An emmetropic patient who asks about surgery presents an ideal candidate for discussing multifocal contact lenses, according to a leading contact lens practitioner. Upon learning surgery is not an option, this patient will likely be more willing to try multifocal contact lenses—even if contacts are a more complex and costly option than reading glasses.

Another motivating factor for the presbyopic patient is natural function and head movement. Sunglasses aside, emmetropes will have never worn glasses or experienced an object on their face every minute of every day. For these patients, adapting to contact lenses could very well be easier than adapting to frames.

Remember to make sure all patients are aware that because these are specialty lenses, multiple fitting visits will likely be necessary. It usually takes about two to three office visits, experts say.

Fitting Fees

Some eye care practitioners assume that patients will be unwilling to pay additional fitting fees and, as a result, may be apprehensive about recommending multifocals.

Patients are also consumers. Once educated about their condition and fully informed of the benefits of multifocal lenses, they are able to recognize the superior value and are often willing to pay a premium for this alternative vision correction. They understand the need for the additional visits necessary to serve their specialized visual needs and the professional fees associated with this process.

It is important that these extra fees not come as a surprise to patients, who are often concerned about paying co-pays or other “hidden” costs. To underscore that the fitting process and the eye exam are two separate services, some practitioners schedule separate appointments for contact lens fittings.

Once established, interest in multifocal lenses can be very strong among a broad range of presbyopic patients, probably stronger than you think.

When patients are well informed, educated and managed, these lenses represent a major practice growth opportunity. ●

Mr. Celia is a freelance healthcare writer based in the Philadelphia area.

1. International gathering of leading eye care professionals in November 2007 to discuss the state of presbyopia education and awareness among patients.


The Multifocal Message

As the manufacturer of the leading silicone hydrogel multifocal contact lens (PureVision® Multifocal), Bausch & Lomb has a substantial interest in building consumer awareness around presbyopia and its correction options. The company has invested in aggressive direct-to-consumer advertising over the years. Over that timeframe there has been a dramatic rise in the number of people new to the multifocal category.

2007 saw roughly 100,000 new-to-category patients, and in 2008 doubled that figure to 200,000. The company continues to make efforts to reach those eye care practitioners who may still retain skepticism about multifocals left over from the days when success rates seldom topped 50 percent.

“When ECPs fit patients with B&L multifocals (both Soflens® Multi-Focal and PureVision Multi-Focal), they can be assured they are giving their patients the opportunity to achieve the best vision possible with the number one multifocal design,” says Michael Pier, OD, Director, Professional Relations at B&L.

“Patient satisfaction and overall success rates continue to trump other correction options year after year. Stop by the Bausch & Lomb booth #548 at SECO to learn more.”

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