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Refractive Surgery Council Reports Demand for Laser Vision Correction Procedures Increases During COVID-19 Pandemic

Frustration with Foggy Glasses While Wearing Masks, Fear of Contaminating Contact Lenses, Increased Screen Time Causing Dry Eye, Main Factors Behind Surge

DALLAS (March 22, 2021) – The COVID-19 pandemic has caused many people to reassess their lifestyles and health, including eye health, resulting in an increased interest in laser vision correction procedures such as LASIK and SMILE. The Refractive Surgery Council (RSC), which helps consumers make informed choices about their vision correction options, reports an uptick in procedures – 16.3 percent year-over-year – in the last quarter of 2020, despite the challenges eye surgeons and practices faced in 2020 including pandemic-related quarantines and shutdowns.

“It’s clear people are ready to take back control of their lives and make decisions with self-care at the top of their priorities. Frustration with masks and increased screen time are the main factors behind the surge,” said RSC Chairman Jim Wachtman. “Our data indicates pandemic fatigue is gradually being replaced with optimism now that we have rapid testing and vaccines to help in the fight against the COVID-19 virus. It’s a perfect time – especially for those working from home and saving money – to have laser vision correction surgery.”

Factors fueling demand for LASIK, in addition to mask-wearing and fogging glasses, include the rising need to work from home. People have been staring at their own faces during Zoom calls for months now and becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the way they look in eyeglasses. Or they constantly fiddle with their contacts as their eyes dry out from long hours in front of screens. The demands placed on eyes and vision during the pandemic have vision correction patients seeking out alternatives that better suit their needs now and in the future.

“At Vance Thompson Vision, we have seen roughly a 30 percent increase in laser eye surgery during the pandemic,” said Vance Thompson, M.D., member of the RSC editorial advisory board and director of refractive surgery for Vance Thompson Vision in Sioux Falls, S.D. “We think it is because the pandemic made people really look at what they value in life such as family, friends, and choices they have thought about and realized that it is time to do some of those things they have dreamt of doing in life. Yes, we have seen occupational and mask-related reasons but for the most part, we feel the increase is because the pandemic made people appreciate life and their desires more.”

Safety Protocols

Since the start of the pandemic, practices across the country have introduced health and safety measures to protect their patients and staff. These measures often include holding consultations and pre-surgery screenings virtually to reduce in-person appointments; limiting the number of surgeries and scheduling them further apart; calling patients before surgery to screen them for symptoms of the virus; taking a patient's temperature upon arrival at the surgery; maintaining social distancing; sanitizing surfaces and equipment between patients; having staff wear personal protective equipment (PPE); requiring patients to wear masks, and placing hand sanitizers throughout the practice.

"The health and safety of our patients and staff is our primary concern," said Robert Maloney, M.D. of the Maloney-Shamie Vision Institute in Los Angeles, Calif. "We have extensive infection prevention protocols throughout the patient experience in our facility. Doctors and staff are now vaccinated, and everyone is wearing high-quality masks. Elective surgery is very safe, safer than a grocery store or a restaurant."

Another potential benefit of laser vision correction is a reduced risk of virus transmission. When people wear glasses or contacts, they touch their face more often with their hands and there is the potential for the virus to enter through their eyes.

Laser Vision Correction Procedures

Laser vision correction procedures, including LASIK, PRK, and SMILE, can treat most common vision problems including nearsightedness, farsightedness, and astigmatism. With these advanced laser vision correction options, the eye surgeon reshapes the patient's cornea so that light entering the eye is focused onto the retina for clearer vision. The goal of laser vision correction is to help patients reduce or, in most cases, eliminate their need for prescription eyeglasses and/or contact lenses, safely and effectively. Surgeons recommend a procedure based on a patient's candidacy, specific vision needs, and lifestyle demands.

- LASIK (Laser in Situ Keratomileusis) corrects vision problems such as nearsightedness, farsightedness, and astigmatism. First, the surgeon uses a femtosecond laser or a microkeratome to make a micron-thin, circular flap in the surface of the eye. The flap is gently moved to expose the layer of tissue where the vision correction treatment takes place with a computer-guided excimer laser. The flap is then laid back, protecting the reshaped portion of the cornea while it heals.
- During PRK (Photorefractive Keratectomy), surgeons use an excimer laser to remove microscopic amounts of tissue from the surface of the patient's cornea. PRK treats nearsightedness, farsightedness, and astigmatism by reshaping the corneal surface to improve the eye's ability to focus.
- SMILE (Small Incision Lenticule Extraction) treats nearsightedness and astigmatism. Surgeons use a femtosecond laser to create a thin disc of tissue – like the shape of a contact lens – from within the layers of the patient's cornea. The disc of tissue is removed through a small opening in the surface of the eye, also created by the laser. This changes the overall shape of the cornea and improves vision while leaving most of the eye's surface undisturbed.

About the Refractive Surgery Council

Formed in 2010, the Refractive Surgery Council is a leading voice in the field of refractive surgery. Its members are comprised of industry representatives from Alcon, Johnson & Johnson Vision Surgical, Zeiss, and Ziemer, as well as medical organizations, including the American Society of Cataract and Refractive Surgery (ASCRS), the American-European Congress of Ophthalmic Surgery (AECOS), the International Society for Refractive Surgery (ISRS) and the Refractive Surgery Alliance Society (RSA). Through its educational programs, RSC helps people make informed choices about the way people see the world. For more information about RSC, go to <https://americanrefrativesurgerycouncil.org/>.

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