

Are you a candidate?

By Wendy Zang
Eagle/Times

Not everyone can have LASIK, laser in-situ keratomileusis, to correct vision, and not everyone who can should.

In general, good candidates have healthy eyes and vision that can be corrected with glasses or contacts, said Dr. Adam J. Altman, a fellowship-trained cornea and refractive surgery specialist with West Reading Ophthalmic Associates.

LASIK, according to the LASIK Institute, is not available to people who:

- Are pregnant.
- Have unstable or uncontrolled diabetes.
- Have an autoimmune disease.
- Take drugs or undergo therapy that suppresses the immune system.
- Have an uncontrolled vascular disease.
- Have medical problems related to the eyes, such as amblyopia (lazy eye), glaucoma or cataracts.

People also should be at least 20 years old before having the surgery, since vision is not stable before that age, Altman said.

There is no upper age limit for LASIK, but most candidates are under 60 because there is a high risk of cataracts and glaucoma beyond that age.

LASIK can treat nearsightedness, farsightedness and astigmatism, but a patient's condition can be too severe to treat.

In addition to understanding the procedure and risks, good candidates must be willing to dedicate the time and money to have LASIK done.

The surgery itself often takes less than 20 minutes, but patients will be out of work for a few days and will be required to go to pre-op and post-op examinations.

Patients in Berks County will have to travel to have the procedure done, since there is no laser center in the county. The nearest are in the Philadelphia area.

LASIK surgery costs \$1,800 to \$2,800 an eye, according to the LASIK Institute. Most insurance companies consider the surgery elective and do not cover it.

Altman said he does not expect companies ever to cover the procedure, since it is expensive and vision can be corrected with contact lenses or glasses.

Altman warned against what he calls "discount surgeons."

Some inexperienced surgeons will offer LASIK for extremely low prices to attract patients and gain experience with the procedure, he said.



Eagle/Times: Tori Galluccio

Dr. Adam J. Altman uses a syringe to place a drop or two of saline solution on Christa J. Miller's cornea. The drops help to reposition a flap of the cornea trimmed and moved aside at the beginning of laser in-situ keratomileusis, or LASIK surgery.

Seeing Is Believing

LASIK, a new surgical technique yields corrected vision with remarkably short recovery time

By Wendy Zang

Eagle/Times

PLYMOUTH MEETING — As Christa J. Miller sat in the surgeon's chair before her laser eye surgery, Dr. Adam J. Altman asked if she could see the clock on the wall 7 feet in front of her.

"What clock?" asked Miller, whose eyesight was 20/1500.

Altman reclined the chair, performed LASIK, or laser in-situ keratomileusis, and, 20 minutes after he began the procedure, sat Miller up.

"What time is it?" Altman asked.

"9:28," Miller said.

For the first time she could remember, Miller of Reading could see without the help of contact lenses or glasses.

Less than 24 hours after the surgery, Miller, 29, had 20/20 vision in her left eye and 20/25 vision in her right, said Altman, 39, a fellowship-trained cornea and refractive surgery specialist with West Reading Ophthalmic Associates.

Five days after LASIK, Miller had 20/20 vision in both eyes.

Sound too good to be true?

"It was unreal," Miller said of the surgery, performed at TLC The Laser Center, Plymouth Meeting. She said every morning when she wakes up, she is amazed by her improved sight.

But LASIK is real, and more than 800,000 procedures are expected to be performed in the United States this year, according to the LASIK Institute.

The relatively new procedure is so popular because it yields dramatic results with little recovery time or pain. And patients are willing to foot the \$1,800 to \$2,800 bill per eye themselves — most insurance companies do not cover the procedure — for a chance at glasses-free eyesight.

LASIK, affectionately called "flap and zap" by surgeons, works like this:

After numbing the patient's eyes with anesthetizing drops, the surgeon cuts a hinged flap in the top layer of the cornea using a motorized blade called a microkeratome.

The surgeon lifts the flap, about

the size and shape of a soft contact lens. A laser sears away thin layers of tissue from the underlying cornea, reshaping it and correcting vision. The flap is gently put back in place and sticks naturally, eliminating the need for stitches.

The outpatient surgery usually lasts less than 10 minutes per eye, and many surgeons will correct both eyes in the same visit.

Like Miller, most patients see immediate results, and their vision is dramatically improved within a week, said Altman, who has performed more than 200 LASIK surgeries in the last two years.

Two-thirds of patients who undergo the surgery end up with 20/20 vision, and 98 percent end up with 20/40 vision — good enough to drive a car without the need for glasses or contacts, Altman said.

The results often parallel the patient's vision before surgery, Altman said. The better the patient's pre-LASIK vision, the better the results.

LASIK is relatively painless, and recovery time is slim.

Pain during surgery concerned Miller, especially since patients remain awake for the entire procedure. But, as Altman promised, Miller's surgery was pain-free.

"I didn't feel a thing, and I'm a big sissy," she said.

Miller said the only discomfort came from the device used to keep her eyes open during surgery.

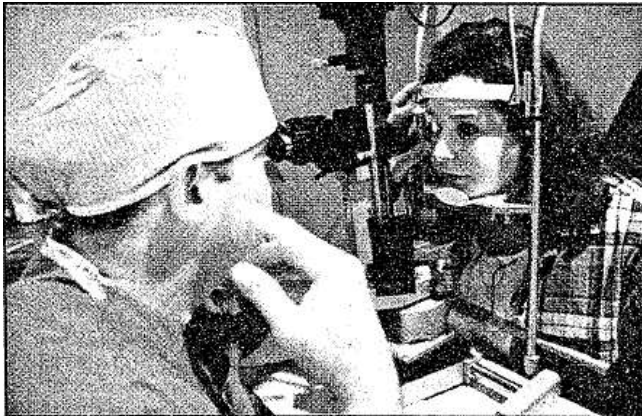
While eyesight is better immediately after LASIK, patients can expect their sight to be temporarily hazy or blurry and may experience some mild burning or weeping.

Sight typically clears a day to a week after the surgery.

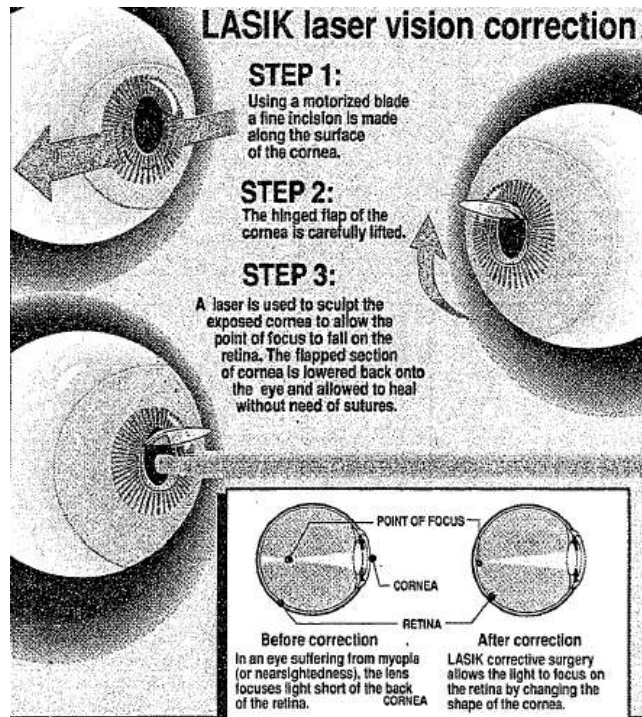
Altman advises patients to sleep with a protective eye shield the first night after the surgery to prevent rubbing, which may dislodge the corneal flap.

But Altman said the shield is just a precaution because the flap is well-sealed by the time a patient leaves the office.

LASIK patients also are told to



Dr. Adam J. Altman examines Christa J. Miller's eyes after LASIK surgery, shown in progress at top right in a TV monitor image of Miller's eye.



Eagle/Times: Corey McCarty

For more information on LASIK, including advice on selecting a surgeon, treatment options, expectations and technology, see the LASIK Institute Web site at <http://www.lasikinstitute.org>.

See Seeing, Page F4 ▶