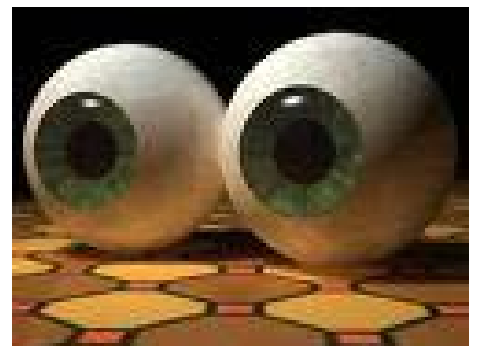


Before You Have Lasik Eye Surgery

The research that I wish I would have done
and the questions I wish I would have asked
before I let them cut on my eyes.

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Before You Have Lasik Eye Surgery

“I wish I had a nickel for every person I’ve heard about who had a problem from Lasik surgery. I know it’s not uncommon.”

– Trisha Torrey, www.EveryPatientsAdvocate.com (personal correspondence)

For many people, Lasik has been a blessing. In my case, it’s been a nightmare – the biggest mistake I ever made. And true to the phenomenon that you notice lots of red pick-up trucks after you’ve purchased one, after my Lasik misfortune I discovered that I’m far from the only one who’s ended up wishing that I’d never had it done. You can read some real horror stories at <http://www.lifeafterlasik.com/patients.htm>. Consider my case to be sort of a middle-of-the-road bad outcome. I have been unable to locate any valid scientific studies that quantify the specific risks of a bad outcome, and it’s frankly not in the interests of the Lasik industry to have such a study done. So it’s up to you consider the risks and be realistic about the chances you are willing to take.

Lasik surgery left me with double vision, reduced visual acuity, and blurred night vision. Before the surgery I required one pair of glasses; I now need four different pairs (special reading glasses with a different prescription in each lens due to inadvertent mono-vision; glasses with a different prescription for working at the computer, including built-in glare protection; sunglasses with prism lenses to reduce double vision during the day; and a different pair of prism lenses for nighttime). My eyes almost always bother me, especially when I’m reading or working at a computer (both of which are essential in my profession). I take five different prescription eye drops and buy over-the-counter eye drops several bottles at a time. I take fish oil pills, eye vitamins, and oral antibiotics for dry eye syndrome. I’ve spent more money coping with the damage caused by Lasik surgery than the \$4,500 that I spent to have the surgery done in the first place. I did not have the surgery at some fly-by-night operation, but at the largest eye clinic in Iowa – which promotes itself as having the most capable clinicians in the Midwest and promises “better vision for a better life.”

If you or someone you know is considering Lasik, this report will describe some things you should think about before you let anyone carve on your precious eyes. Keep in mind that this advice is coming from someone who had an unfortunate Lasik outcome, and who as a result is going to be more conservative and discouraging than someone who had a great experience. But if you’re considering a discretionary surgical procedure that will *permanently* impact not only your vision but your quality of life and your ability (or inability) to get your work done, this is exactly the sort of advice you need.

Remember that this surgery is NOT REVERSIBLE

If you have a great outcome, it can be wonderful. But never forget that you are subjecting what many of us consider to be our most precious sense – the sense of sight – to an optional surgical operation, and that if it goes badly you might regret having entrusted your eyes to the Lasik clinic for the rest of your life.

Be certain that you are willing to take the risk of a bad outcome

The Lasik industry reports a 95 percent satisfaction rate with the procedure (I don't believe it's anywhere near that high partly because of the numbers of unhappy Lasik patients I personally come across, but for now let's go with it). If that's true, you need to ask yourself this question: *If you knew there was a one-in-twenty chance that an operation you don't need except to not have to wear glasses would permanently impair your eyesight and cause you serious and ongoing physical and mental distress – would you take that risk?* Even given the rosy numbers presented by the industry (19-in-20 happy patients) those are the dice you are rolling – a one-in-twenty chance of a bad outcome. When the surgeon turns on that laser, it's a toss of the dice. The dice might be loaded in your favor, but there's still a chance you'll come up with snake eyes. How much risk are you willing to take when it comes to your vision? I thought it would never be me – and I hope it won't be you – that falls into that five percent bucket (which, by the way, equates to 35,000 Lasik failures a year at the current rate of surgery).

Be very clear about why you want Lasik, and what your definition of success will be

Before Lasik, I could read the 20/20 line on an eye chart with crystal clarity if I had my glasses on. Now I can make out the letters without glasses with one eye covered, but they are quite fuzzy. When I open both eyes, I can still make out the letters, but they are even fuzzier because of my double vision. I require four different pairs of glasses and take eye drops around 50 times a day. But because I can make out the 20/20 line, my surgery was “a success” by the standards of the Lasik industry.

When your surgeon tells you that his or her success rate is close to 100 percent, ask specifically what they are measuring (if in fact they are measuring – the clinic where I had my surgery done clearly does not monitor adverse outcomes). According to Lasik Surgery Watch (www.lasiksurgerywatch.org), “One of the most telling issues that LASIK Surgery Watch has identified is the disconnect between what the LASIK industry sees as a success and what a patient experiences,” something reported by 63 percent of their members.

Understand the economics of the Lasik business

This is a cash-on-the-barrelhead business, and competition has driven prices down. That's not necessarily good news for patients. The eye clinic must cover the cost of equipment, overhead, and six-figure doctor salaries. This creates two serious problems for you the patient. First, *the surgeon has an inherent conflict of interest*. This is not being judgmental, it is a statement of fact. Eye surgeons make money operating on eyes, not sending people away because they're not suitable candidates. While your surgeon is (hopefully!) an honest person, he or she is also under real pressure to produce, perhaps including a production quota from his or her employer. You are the buyer, and in the case of Lasik it is buyer beware. *Never mistake a sales pitch for a diagnosis*. In my case, I was told that I was "a perfect candidate" for Lasik, when in fact I had several significant contraindications.

Second, because you pay for Lasik with cash up-front, the surgeon has little economic incentive to take care of you following the surgery, and that incentive rapidly diminishes over time. If you end up with serious complications, your follow-up care could cost the clinic far more than you paid to have the surgery done in the first place. It is human nature to follow economic incentives, and eye surgeons are not immune from this nature. I paid about \$4,500 for Lasik surgery, including the "touch-up" operation after the first surgery left me with vision troubles (see below for my comment on the term "touch-up"). Once it became clear that my problems would not respond to more eye drops, the clinic dropped me like a hot potato. I repeatedly told clinic doctors that double vision was causing me serious problems, including making me an unsafe driver, but no one did anything to help me cope with the condition. When I obtained a copy of my medical record, I discovered that the operating surgeon had documented that he needed to refer me to his clinic's in-house strabismus (double vision) expert, but that referral was never made – I finally had to refer myself to the university hospital specialist to get special glasses with prism lenses to correct for double vision. That failure to refer me for the specialized care I required was obviously negligence on the part of the surgeon, but I also believe it reflects a business culture where productivity and profit get priority over quality. Before you go in for surgery, carefully scrutinize the clinic's policy regarding follow-up care. If they make a mess of your eyes, you will want a written guarantee that they'll be there for you when you most need them.

Get multiple opinions

Most clinics that do Lasik are happy to give you a free assessment, and you should get more than one. If there is a teaching hospital nearby, get an opinion from a faculty physician who might not have the economic incentive to push through surgeries that exists in private

practice. You should also get an opinion from one or more optometrists. Contrary to what you might think, in many cases people who have Lasik surgery end up spending *more* money, not less, on optometry services – for reading glasses, sunglasses, treatment of dry eyes, and the like. I have spent more money on eyeglasses in the two years since having Lasik than I spent in the previous several decades. And my optometrist has become one of the most important people in my life.

Consider the impact on your career and hobby interests

If your work requires lots of time spent working at a computer, reading, working with fine detail, or driving (especially at night) be sure to discuss this with the surgeon. Make sure you are reasonably assured that Lasik will not interfere with your ability to get your work done, make a living, and enjoy your life. In addition, speak with people in your specific career field and/or who have similar interests outside of work about the consequences – good and bad – that corrective eye surgery has had for them.

Understand that dry eye syndrome is more than just dry eyes

Dry eye syndrome is one of the most common complications of Lasik. The ophthalmologist might tell you that this can be treated with eye drops and if necessary punctal plugs (which block your tear ducts, theoretically keeping more moisture on the eye) – and that the condition is usually transient. My case is more severe than typical, but I've come across others who are a lot worse. I now take five different prescription eye drops and use over-the-counter eye drops 25-50 times a day – and the relief is partial and very temporary. I usually wake up once or twice during the night needing to put more drops in my eyes. Activities that once brought me great joy – like writing at the computer and reading – are now physically painful experiences (especially late in the day). Having to repeatedly put in eye drops while (for example) in the middle of a meeting with clients is not the professional image that I wish to project.

Insist on being checked for occult strabismus

Insist on being tested for occult strabismus – double vision. I had strabismus from a very early age, but my brain learned to accommodate the condition. Lasik surgery derailed that coping mechanism, and I now have double vision and must wear special glasses with built-in prisms. In all likelihood, this would have been prevented had the clinic performed proper tests. An article in *American Orthoptic Journal* (“Strabismus Misadventures in Refractive Surgery” by Furr, Archer and Del Monte) made this recommendation: “Refractive surgeons are encouraged to make sensory and muscle evaluations part of their pre operative regimen for *all* candidates for refractive surgery” (emphasis added). The potential for preventing

Lasik-induced double vision is also discussed in “Diplopia After Refractive Surgery: Occurrence and Prevention” by Kushner and Kowal in *Archives of Ophthalmology*, 2003.

Check references

Ask to speak with patients who have been operated on by your surgeon. Tell the surgeon that you want to speak with one or more patients who were unhappy with their results so you can get a feel for how well they stand by patients who have had adverse outcomes. If they tell you they never have unhappy patients, head for the door. You should also do a Google search, check Angie’s List, Yelp!, and other online rating services, and anything else that will help you make the best decision.

Ask to see your medical record before the surgery

Insist on seeing your medical record prior to being operated on, and make sure that you fully understand every medical term you see. Unfortunately, I did not ask to see my record until after the damage had been done. Had I asked before, I would have seen an entry by the surgeon documenting that I had a condition called “blepharitis,” and stating that he had discussed that condition with me. I have absolutely no recollection of such a conversation. Had I seen the record before going into the operating room, I would have learned that blepharitis is an inflammation of the eyelids and that many eye surgeons consider it to be a contraindication for Lasik unless it’s been treated, which mine was not. If the clinic refuses to let you see your record before the surgery, go somewhere else because you can assume they’re hiding something.

Don’t settle for a generic warning

The clinic will probably show you a generic video, give you a generic consent form to sign, and ask if you have any questions. *You do not have generic eyes* – ask for a discussion of potential risks that are specific to your age, your occupation, your prescription, and any special conditions you might have. Especially if your work entails lots of driving or working with a computer, specifically ask about possible complications that could interfere with your ability to be productive. One of the key criticisms of Lasik clinics made in recent FDA hearings was that most patient consent is not, in fact, “informed.”

Be especially careful to avoid hearing only what you want to hear. I cannot tell you a thing about the consent video I watched or the consent form I signed – all I remember is sitting in the exam room with my wife and having the clinic’s PhD optometrist tell us that I was “a perfect candidate” for the procedure. As a former hospital administrator, I should have known better, but if I can fall into that trap, I suppose anyone can.

A second surgery is not a touch-up

Don't let the euphemism "touch-up" deceive you into thinking that a second procedure is somehow safer than the initial surgery. It's still an invasive operative procedure on your most precious sense organ. In my case, the "touch-up" made the double vision worse, increased the chronic and painful irritation in my eyes, and by removing even more of my cornea ruled out any further surgery by a more capable clinician at some future date.

Long term consequences are uncertain but problems are likely

I've read that between one-quarter and one-third of patients who have Lasik eventually end up having to go back to glasses, have additional surgery, or run into other problems. Having Lasik surgery now might make it more difficult or impossible for a physician to treat cataracts should you have them later. The procedure is still so new that no one really knows what problems might come about decades after the surgery, but it's certain that having part of your cornea sliced away can do nothing but weaken the structure of the eye.

Anticipate the potential for emotional distress

One of the more subtle potential complications of adverse Lasik outcomes is emotional distress, depression, anger, and even suicidal ideation. It's my business as a speaker on personal motivation to be a positive and upbeat person, and I'm trying very hard to create a positive "spin" for my own Lasik disaster. Still, I struggle with anger at the surgeon who gave me a dishonest diagnosis, botched the surgery and carved the wrong prescription into my eyes, and then abandoned me when I was most in need of follow-up medical care. I'm angry with myself for not having done the homework that I'm recommending to readers of this report. It's depressing to know that I didn't have to be going through this experience, that it was optional – I *chose* to have the procedure and I selected the clinic.

I can tell you from personal experience that having your world be always slightly out of focus, having your eyes hurt all the time, finding it difficult to be productive in your work, and all because of a bad outcome in a surgery that you did not have to have, can grind you down. I take it very seriously now when I hear people say that Lasik has ruined their lives, because I can see how that could happen. The following website includes video testimony before an FDA panel, both pro and con – watch the video of Dr. Michael Mullery for a description of worst case emotional outcomes:

http://www.flawedlasik.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=629&Itemid=30

Don't get suckered by the hype

The FDA recently issued an advisory letter to the Lasik industry warning about deceptive advertising practices. The FDA website says: "Be cautious about 'slick' advertising and/or deals that sound 'too good to be true.' Remember, they usually are. There is a lot of competition resulting in a great deal of advertising and bidding for your business. Do your homework."



You will have little or no recourse if things go wrong

One of the biggest surprises I experienced when I tried to get the clinic to take my problems seriously was being almost completely ignored. As I pointed out in an unanswered letter to the clinic CEO, the way I was treated transformed me from being a patient who simply wanted help in dealing with the serious problems *that their doctors had caused* into an angry activist. I hope my experience is unique, but I'm afraid many people who have serious complications end up having to fend for themselves the way I did. And unless you are seriously injured or blinded, it is very unlikely you will be able to bring a successful lawsuit, partly because it will be almost impossible to find an expert witness from within the Lasik fraternity. Indeed, a New York judge recently issued a protective order for an expert witness in a Lasik lawsuit, stating:

When viewed collectively, the evidence submitted by plaintiffs demonstrates a concrete risk that the expert ophthalmologist would be subjected to annoyance, expense, embarrassment, and disadvantage, if identified before trial. The culture of the LASIK industry, as described in plaintiffs' various submissions, coupled with the fact that plaintiffs' expert has already 'personally born the brunt of antagonistic comments from colleagues for representing patients in LASIK malpractice claims,' leads the Court to find that a protective order is warranted.

And finally

Remember that you have the right to call off the surgery right up to the moment the surgeon starts carving your corneas. After that, the result is forever.

Additional online resources

It is very difficult to find objective online resources. Most Lasik-related websites seem to be either produced by those with an economic interest in the Lasik industry or by injured patients. These are some of the websites that I wish I would have checked out before submitting my eyes to laser surgery:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LQD3b-cFZdA> &

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYss7yOacHk&NR=1> – Short news reports – **watch these for a quick executive summary of the potential implications of the choice you might be about to make.**

<http://www.lasikfda.com/> - Official website of the Food and Drug Administration, which includes an overview of potential complications of Lasik.

http://thelasikreport.com/TheLasikReport_April2008.pdf - I have not been able to find out who authored this report, but it is a forceful argument against Lasik. This is the conclusion of that report (PDF downloaded at this link): “There has and continues to be a pattern within the refractive surgery industry placing patients’ interests secondary to financial interests. Physicians are ethically bound to put the best interests of patients first. LASIK is an unnecessary surgical procedure that permanently damages the eyes of every patient... [The] practice of LASIK should be discontinued.

<http://lasik-flap.com/> - This site documents the history and current medical studies that militate against Lasik. On the home page it states “We do not endorse refractive surgery because there is abundant evidence in current medical literature that corneal refractive surgery compromises the ocular health and visual quality of the eye.” Especially noteworthy are its links to patient websites.

<http://www.lasikdisaster.com/> - The title of this site speaks for itself. Anyone contemplating Lasik owes it to him or herself to read “Top Ten Reasons to Not Have Lasik Surgery” and ask whether in his or her own mind those potential problems are resolved or at least mitigated.

<http://www.usaeyes.org/> - This site claims to certify Lasik doctors, but critics call it a scam. The only reason I include it in this list is that it features a document titled “50 Tough Questions For Your Lasik Doctor.” These questions are worth reading, but in my opinion a more apt title would be 50 Ridiculous Questions For Your Lasik Doctor.