

Laser lottery

We take a close look at the risks associated with laser eye surgery

It's amazing that such a simple procedure can give such incredible results,' says athlete Jonathan Edwards, describing his successful laser eye surgery on Ultralase's website. Like thousands of others treated by laser surgery every year, he no longer needs glasses or contact lenses.

But, in stark contrast to the slick marketing and celebrity endorsements, the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (Nice) recently recommended that the most widely used form of laser eye surgery (called Lasik) should not be made available on the NHS as not enough is known about its safety. Professor Bruce Campbell from Nice said: 'Many people have had Lasik treatment, but there's little information about how many suffer complications or damage to their eye as a result.'

Some doctors, for example, believe Lasik may weaken the cornea (the front of the eye), causing long-term problems. Greg Gemoules is an optometrist based in Texas who specialises in treating patients who have had severe problems after laser surgery. He told us: 'I believe there are lingering problems that haven't been resolved. More research is needed.'

However, many laser eye clinics and experienced ophthalmologists reject the Nice recommendation. The Eye Laser Association (ELA), which represents several clinics, says that numerous studies show Lasik to be safe and effective. It also points out that the NHS currently funds less than 5 per cent of all expenditure on glasses and contact lenses. 'For cost reasons alone it was therefore never likely that Nice would recommend that laser eye treatment be provided on the NHS,' Bruce Allan, consultant

Complication rates after surgery

vary greatly between doctors

ophthalmologist at Moorfields Eye Hospital in London, believes things may change: 'The Nice guidance is only preliminary. A review body is looking at all evidence and will report next year.'

SAFE IN WHOSE HANDS?

Evidence is hard to gather as not all clinics publish details of the results of operations. Two well-respected clinics that do divulge details have told us that about 5 per cent of people who undergo Lasik treatment experience complications. Serious problems, such as infections and ectasia (bulging

cornea), are very few, though these do occur. New technology has reduced the incidence of night-vision problems, and persistent dry eyes are unusual in people with normal eyes before surgery.

Most complications, if treated quickly and correctly, don't harm vision. Around 5 per cent of short-sighted patients (and more who are long-sighted) need to be retreated because the first operation isn't successful. The second treatment usually works, but it exposes patients to more risk.

Senior ophthalmologists don't deny that risks exist but point out that complication rates vary greatly between surgeons. Bruce Allan tracks his results and believes that 'laser surgery is safe in the right setting and the right hands'. It's more risky for certain people, including pregnant women, diabetics, and people with dry eyes.

THE HARD SELL

Because of the risks, both Nice and the ELA say patients must be fully informed before opting for surgery. But Rebecca Petris, from patient advocacy group LaserMyEye (www.lasermeye.org), is concerned that 'in some clinics, safety messages are glossed over in the hard sell.' When our researchers phoned 14 clinics across the UK, posing as short-sighted patients, several clinics failed to tell us about the potential risks.

● A member of staff at Accuvision told us 'there aren't any' side effects apart from a little discomfort on the day. When asked directly about particular symptoms, he wrongly told us that everyone gets dry eyes after the operation and that it wouldn't make night-vision problems worse. He stressed

OUR INVESTIGATION

We contacted the following clinics, posing as patients, to ask about the risks and side effects of laser eye surgery.

Accuvision, London
Advance VisionCare, London
Advanced Laser, Scotland and Ireland
Holborn Laser Clinic, London
Kirkwood Fyfe, Aberdeen
LaserSight, Essex
Moorfields Eye Hospital, London
Optical Express, nationwide
Optimax, nationwide
Optimeyes, Brentwood
Rosen Eye Centre, Manchester
Site for Eyes, Sunderland
Eye Infirmary
Ultralase, nationwide
Visualase, Bolton
 We then contacted the same clinics, plus the London Vision Clinic, asking for details of their success and complication rates.

that the chance of complications was remote.

- An employee at Rosen Eye Centre said the clinic wouldn't use laser surgery on anyone with a prescription worse than minus two dioptries (mildly short sighted). Instead, she recommended a much more serious (and potentially risky) lens implant operation costing £5,500. When we called again, the clinic contradicted its initial advice and said it would treat prescriptions up to minus eight.

- A member of staff at Optimax wrongly said: 'The only risk is that there's a possibility you can get an infection or if a bit of dirt gets in your eye.' She then said the clinic's consent form lists the risks 'but it's the worst case scenario...we have to put it down, but it's never known to happen.'

- Kirkwood Fyfe's employee initially said she wasn't aware of any side effects. When asked about dry-eye symptoms, she said these were common.

MISSING DATA

The Healthcare Commission is responsible for inspecting laser eye clinics to ensure they meet certain standards. It states that clinics should give patients a guide to the operation but doesn't specify what information this should include. The Royal College of Ophthalmologists (RCOphth) has more detailed guidance, though this is only voluntary. It recommends that clinics publish details of how frequently complications occur after surgery, as well as the likelihood of success.

Lost faith in lasers



Jon Kell, 45, had laser eye surgery last year. 'I enjoy outdoor pursuits and I found wearing glasses irritating', he told us. At his consultation, he was told the chance of any complications was minimal. But, after surgery, Jon found he'd suffered damage to the outside layer of both eyes. He was also suffering from dry eyes and felt his sight was getting worse. He agreed to undergo further surgery on one eye to correct his vision. But, even after retreatment, he still has poor sight and suffers from dry eyes. 'If I could go back in time, I'd choose not to have the treatment,' he says. 'Now, if I don't wear glasses most of the time, I get headaches. I'm back to being short sighted again'. He's lost confidence in laser surgery and has decided against more treatment.

Yet when we contacted 15 clinics – all of which claim to adhere to RCOphth standards – nine didn't provide us with any published information. And only three (Ultralase, London Vision Clinic, and Moorfields) provided us with full published details of complication and success rates based on their own patients' operations – something that's vital to know if you're shopping around.

Site for Eyes and Visualase gave us their published success rates but these alone aren't enough. A surgeon may rate an operation a 'success' if a patient can read an eye chart, but they may still have troubling side effects. Kirkwood Fyfe wrongly told us that its success and complication rates were in its consent form. Holborn said it discusses success and complication rates with patients, but it doesn't publish figures. Optimeyes gave no details of complication rates, and its success rates were from the laser manufacturer's studies. The other seven clinics didn't respond.

As patient advocate Rebecca Petris points out: 'Patients can't compare clinics unless they publish their own data.' Dan Reinstein from the London Vision Clinic agrees: 'You can't give informed consent without the numbers.' When we put these points to Brenda Billington, Vice President of RCOphth, she told us: 'We can't force surgeons to make their results public and we've no power to make clinics adhere to our standards.' Christopher Neave, chair of the ELA, said it was an 'aspiration' for clinics to report their results in a standard way.

CALL FOR MORE REGULATION

In December, a parliamentary inquiry into the laser industry called for stricter regulation and new guidelines from the RCOphth and the College of Optometrists. It recommended that the Healthcare Commission be given 'resources to properly regulate and monitor the industry' and the ability to apply 'serious and meaningful sanctions where clinics or surgeons fail to comply with standards'. The recommendations are being sent to the Health Select Committee and government ministers. ■

which? says

Laser eye surgery is a great development but it's not risk free. Our research shows that some clinics aren't giving patients the information they need to make informed choices.

We want the government to enforce the tougher standards recommended by the parliamentary inquiry. And we'd like all clinics to publish details of their complication

rates, with information monitored by an independent body. We also want sanctions, to deter clinics from giving misleading advice or unsuitable treatment.

Until then, patients must protect themselves. Always ask for the surgeon's track record and whether there's anything in your medical history that makes you unsuitable for laser treatment.

Claims made by the clinics

- Advanced Laser claims: 'Just about anyone over 21 who uses contact lenses or glasses can benefit'. In fact, some clinics turn away 30 per cent of people because they're not suitable for treatment.

- In 2003, the Advertising Standards Authority ruled that Accuvision was wrong to claim that it used superior technology and could treat patients who were rejected by other clinics.

- Leaflets from Boots Opticians (since sold to Optical Express) used to state: 'Look forward to a future without glasses or contact lenses.' The General Optical Council ruled that this claim couldn't be supported and was 'an unacceptable device to draw in prospective clients'. Most young people who have laser surgery for short sight will eventually need glasses for reading. And, while most can see at the driving standard after surgery, a significant minority still need glasses.

- Ultralase's claim 'Wake up every morning to freedom from glasses and contact lenses' at first sight seems similar to the Boots statement. But Ultralase told us it's careful not to claim that you'll never need glasses again.