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The signs are all there...a few extra pounds around the middle, a few less hairs on top, and staying awake through the ten o'clock news is now a struggle...welcome to "middle age." One of the most frustrating features we face in mid-life, however, is the reading dilemma. Lights are just not bright enough and whoever invented fine print should be drawn and quartered. On top of that, our arms are too short and someone keeps hiding the readers. We know lasik can help with distance vision, but can anything restore the reading vision of our youth? The answer now may be YES!

As we reach our 40's, the clear crystalline lens inside the eye stiffens, losing the flexibility to adjust focus from distance to near. This is an inevitable process we all face and likely represents the very first symptom of early cataract formation. Obviously, as discussed in a previous article, a cataract does not need to be removed until it interferes with vision, but if you are facing cataract surgery anyway, new technology may help restore some of that versatile vision of years gone by.

In cataract surgery, your surgeon will remove the cloudy crystalline lens using microsurgical techniques and replace the cataract with an intraocular lens implant (IOL). The standard IOL is a single vision lens usually focused for distance, allowing most people to have good driving vision without glasses. Newer designs, however, offer the possibility of much more natural and versatile vision.

Often referred to as "deluxe," "premium," or "lifestyle" IOL's, these devices are placed into the eye just as a conventional IOL would be placed. The surgery is the same, no additional risk, but some important potential gains. Just like glasses, one version of these new IOL's uses multifocal (bifocal and trifocal) technology, allowing a full range of vision from distance to near. This style has distance correction in the center with the intermediate and near powers added in a ring design similar to a bifocal contact lens. Many companies now produce this type of implant but the most widely used is the ReStor made by Alcon.

As an alternative, Bausch and Lomb makes an IOL called the Crystalens using a hinge design that allows the implant to respond to the natural focusing muscles in the eye. When we focus up close, these muscles contract and the Crystalens responds by moving slightly forward in the eye, allowing us to see for reading. When we focus our attention in the distance, these muscles relax and the IOL adjusts accordingly.

Although they use different styles and different technologies, these IOL's have a number of similarities. Both styles, for example, restore good visual versatility and both work best when used in both eyes. In those cases, greater than 90-95% will achieve 20/40 vision for both distance and near without glasses; 85-90% will achieve 20/25 distance vision without glasses and 20/25 for near. More than 90-95% surveyed claim they glasses seldom or not at all.

Despite all this good news, these IOL's have a few possible pitfalls of which to be aware. First, the multifocal IOL's with the ring design will create some halos around lights at night, a problem which typically fades over time (3-12 months). Fortunately, less than 5% of users find this glare troubling. The hinged Crystalens, on the other hand, is less likely to cause glare but is not as reliable for reading vision as the multifocal lenses. With the hinged system, the lens will provide good distance and intermediate vision in most cases and 20/25 reading vision in greater than 75% of people; some people with the Crystalens in both eyes may still need reading glasses for fine print.

Now for the bad news...these implants are not covered by insurance and Medicare. Although a standard IOL is part of the normal cataract surgery package, these "premium" implants are considered "elective," thus necessitating an out-of-pocket expense on your part. Expect to pay between \$1500-2000 for each eye, in addition to any deductibles and co-pays.

In a nutshell, both the ReStor and the Crystalens provide good distance and near vision with few complications or side-effects, both can be done as part of a typical cataract surgery, and both will be an extra out-of-pocket expense for you. As you contemplate cataract surgery, weigh the risks and benefits to determine if it is right for you. If you are ready, consider the possibilities these new "lifestyle" IOL's offer...the opportunity to restore the vision of your youth.