

HOW TO HAVE LASER EYE SURGERY

by Ross Chainey, Health Editor

Around 100,000 Brits have laser eye surgery every year and for many of them the procedure is life enhancing. Yet much of the information and advice in circulation is conflicting, and many people therefore remain sceptical. We sent our Health Editor to find out how you can have safe laser eye surgery.

Compared to last week, the world through my eyes looks like a different place. No longer will I have to wait until a bus is just yards away before I can tell what number it is (and quite often watch it pass by as I fail to raise my hand in time). Never again will I have to ask for a menu in a sandwich shop because I can't read what's on the board. And not for me the ignominy of going to the cinema or a football match and realising I've forgotten my glasses and will have to ask what's going on.

That's because I now have perfect vision. In fact, I have better than perfect vision. Last week I had anything but. I'm myopic, or short-sighted (or at least I was) and driving, working and watching telly were all impossible without my glasses. Now, I can see absolutely everything. So how did this stunning transformation take place? Contact lenses? No, though I gave them a try but just couldn't get used to them. Nasty bump on the head? Nope. I have in fact had laser eye surgery or, to be more precise, I've had laser in situ keratomileusis (LASIK), and if before the procedure I was Mr Magoo, afterwards I am Superman (without the ability to see through clothes, unfortunately).

WHAT IS LASER EYE SURGERY?

Refractive eye surgery, in its different forms, can be used to treat a number of eye conditions including myopia, hyperopia (longsightedness), astigmatism (when the eye cannot form a sharp image at any distance) and the symptoms of presbyopia (when a person needs reading glasses). There are many benefits of having the surgery, almost all of which involve the freedom that comes with a reduced dependency on glasses or contacts.

There are various types of laser eye surgery and which one you have depends on a number of individual factors, including your prescription, age and visual requirements. Because we are all different, a good eye clinic will conduct various tests to determine which treatment is best for you.

GETTING STARTED

I wanted to have laser eye surgery for years, and not just because my eyesight was bad. I was useless with glasses; forgetting, losing and breaking pairs at any opportunity. And I'm sure many people out there are exactly the same.

It's surprising then that laser eye surgery hasn't really taken off in the UK; not in the way it has in the US. That's because much of the information out there for potential patients is conflicting. You are as likely to read a horror story as you are a positive report, despite the fact that the chances of something going wrong are minimal.

It's only natural, however, to approach laser eye surgery with a certain degree of caution. Our eyes are a major organ and are attached to our brain, so you can't mess around with them. If your eyesight is seriously compromised, then it's hard to do anything about it. And the fact remains that things do sometimes go wrong, and the list of potential risks (such as infection, hemorrhage, equipment malfunction and surgeon error) makes for an uncomfortable read.

It is essential, therefore, that you do it properly. Don't cut any corners, and be prepared to pay top-dollar for the best treatment available. You also have to make sure you do your research. Safety standards and quality of treatment varies widely, and not only do you have to find the best clinic, you also have to find the best surgeon.

My research led me to Professor Dan Reinstein of the London Vision Clinic. According to an issue of Health Which?: "Professor Reinstein is one of the very few ophthalmologists working in the UK who is a fellowship-trained specialist refractive surgeon." Professor Reinstein is also one of the, if not the, leading safety experts when it comes to laser eye surgery.

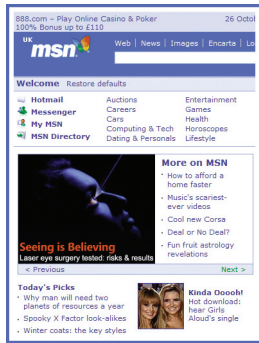
IS IT SAFE?

Professor Reinstein says that standards in the UK have greatly improved in recent years. "In the UK you are in pretty good hands," he said, "and soon practitioners will, for the first time, have to take an exam to get their certificate. Things are looking good in the UK and are getting better all the time. The technology is better here than it is in the US, where the procedure is much more commercial and there are more people providing the cheap specials."



"There is still a lot of ignorance in the UK when it comes to safety and what can be treated. It's natural to be worried but laser eye surgery in the right hands is extraordinarily safe. I've done it on my friends and I would do it on my family. I have no problem with eye surgery, as long as it is done properly. Flying a 747 is safe, as long as you have a good pilot, and it's the same with refractive eye surgery."

Professor Reinstein can't stress enough the importance of finding the right surgeon to carry out the procedure. "Places



or clinics don't carry out laser eye surgery, surgeons do," he says, "And quality really does vary between surgeons. Some people do laser eye surgery one day a week, whereas you want to find someone who does it for five."

The professor has come up with a checklist of things you need to find out when considering a particular surgeon, a process he calls S-T-E-E-R.

Safety: Ask the surgeon what preoperative exams they carry out to determine if you are suitable for any procedure. You should also check how regularly they check up on patients following a procedure.

Technical capability: You want a clinic that has the necessary equipment to carry out examinations and tests on your eyes before you are declared suitable for treatment, as well as a laser that can perform custom treatments that are specific to your needs.

Expertise: The minimum qualification required to practise laser eye surgery in the UK is a medical degree. Your GP could therefore technically carry out your operation. You want a surgeon who has further specialist training to become an ophthalmologist or a corneal specialist.

Experience: Find someone who has carried out 100 procedures under supervision and 1000 since completing their training. You should also enquire as to how many procedures they have performed in the last 12 months and the answer should be at least 500 per year.

Results: Ask the surgeon for information which shows the outcomes of his or her most recent procedures including complication rates. At least 75% of people should have come away with 20/20 vision.

MY EXPERIENCE

After reading as much as I could about laser eye surgery, The London Vision Clinic and Professor Reinstein, I made my way to the clinic for my initial consultation. The first thing that struck me was the length and thoroughness of the process. Staff at the clinic spent a considerable amount of time making sure I understood the potential risks of having the treatment and answering my many questions. The chances of the procedure not going entirely to plan (but not necessarily leading to a serious complication) with an expert like Professor Reinstein is 0.1%.

The tests that I then had to undergo are too long to list in full, but rest assured it was reassuringly thorough. They, among other things, measured my current prescription, the size of my pupils, the pressure inside my eye, imperfections in my vision, the thickness and curvature of my cornea and the amount of tears produced by my eyes. I was also asked questions about my medical history.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't nervous when I returned at a later date for the actual procedure. But any concerns I had on the day were quickly put at ease by Reinstein, who made me eat

chocolate biscuits to get my blood sugar levels up while he explained why I had nothing to worry about and how many of the risks could just as easily be applied to contact lenses.

Reinstein's best move was not to tell me what was going to happen during the procedure. Instead he talked me through it as he went along, which made me feel much more comfortable. The procedure is indeed painless (anaesthetic drops are applied to the eye), though a little unpleasant. The best thing about it is that it is over in about 10 minutes, during which Reinstein cut my corneal flap and zapped my eyes without me really registering what was going on. It was only after I realised that when my vision went blurry, this was the flap on my eye being peeled back. There was also a faint burning smell as the laser was put to work on my eye, which had been clamped open.

After both eyes had received a short sharp blast of the laser and the flap had been replaced, I was told I could sit up. My vision was rather cloudy and my eyes were watering like crazy but I was in no pain. Reinstein asked me to read a chart on the wall, and I knew immediately that my eyesight had greatly improved. I already had 20/30 vision, and throughout the day it would get better and better.

I was allowed to lie down with my eyes closed for 30 minutes to recover before being put in a taxi to go home. I had to keep my eyes closed for three hours without going to sleep to allow my corneas to heal. As the anaesthetic wore off I began to feel a scratchy sensation in my eyes. Once again staff at the clinic had prepared me for this. I was armed with artificial tears and antibiotic drops and further medicines and painkillers to take at specific times to get me through the next week.

I also had to wear rather fetching goggles during the night for seven days to stop me from rubbing my eyes – a small price to pay for what I soon realised was an incredible transformation. From having poor eyesight, I now had 20/10 vision, putting me alongside 2% of the population.

Some clinics will schedule return visits one day, one week, one month, three months and six months after a treatment. The London Vision Clinic is no different, though I will also be back there after one year.

The day after my treatment I was back to normal, doing regular things and marvelling at what I could see. The freedom this treatment has given me is incredible. I no longer have to remember my glasses or to mess around with contact lenses, and for that I am extremely thankful. I'm more thankful, however, that I did my research before taking the plunge – and that it led me to a clinic where the safety of my eyesight was their number one priority. LASIK at London Vision Clinic costs £4200.

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