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End in sight for reading glasses

Millions of middle-aged Britons could soon be able to throw away their reading glasses.

A new treatment, which reverses the damage caused to the eyes by ageing, has now become available in this country.

The painless procedure, called conductive keratoplasty (CK), uses radio waves to reshape the eye without surgery.

" We expect a lot of demand for this treatment "

Dr David Allamby, FOCUS Laser Vision

The treatment lasts just five minutes and costs between £1,000 and £1,500.

Doctors believe it could eclipse laser correction treatment in terms of popularity.

Millions affected

An estimated 18 million Britons need glasses to help them to read as they become long-sighted with advancing age.

The condition affects one in four people over the age of 45 and one in three of those over 55. By aged 60, half of all people need to invest in a pair of reading glasses.

This latest technique, developed in the United States, offers them an alternative.

Patients are first given anaesthetic drops to numb the eye. Doctors then use a tiny probe, which is as fine as human hair, to emit tightly-focused radio waves at specific points on the surface of the eye around the cornea.

The number of points can range from eight to 32 depending on the severity of long-sightedness.

This heat helps to slightly shrink the collagen in the eye. This in turn squeezes the cornea and steepens its curvature, correcting sight.

The technique can be used on both eyes to correct long-sight. But it can also be used on just one eye. This is particularly useful for people who need glasses to read.

They develop what is called "blended vision". They use one eye to read and the other to see in the distance.

The procedure is painless and patients can return to work or drive home that day. The improvements are almost instant.

The treatment was approved by authorities in the United States and European Union last year.

Studies in the US have shown it significantly improved the sight of nine out of 10 patients and half achieved perfect eyesight.

High demand

Doctors in Manchester are the first to offer the treatment. It is expected to be available in London from next month.

"This is the first machine of its kind in the UK," said Dr David Allamby, medical director of FOCUS Laser Vision.

"We expect a lot of demand for this treatment. I think it will be bigger than laser correction."

But Dr Allamby warned that the improvements are not permanent and that patients may have to undergo treatment again after five years.

"It is like winding the clock back five or 10 years. The only thing is in a few years' time, patients may have to wind it back again," he told BBC News Online.