

ISTOCKPHOTO

New techniques heal vision after botched Lasik surgery

By **Bonna Johnson**
THE TENNESSEAN

The vision in John Roth's right eye was blurry. The pain was unbearable. What was supposed to be routine Lasik eye surgery last year to correct his near-sightedness turned into a nightmare when the eye surgeon made a bad incision on the surface of his cornea and had to abort the whole procedure. "It was a pretty traumatic experience," said Roth, 41, who owns a fence company in Alexandria, Tenn., about 50 miles east of Nashville. Lucky for him, what may have been irreparable eye damage a few years ago can be remedied today. Eye surgeons are having more success in correcting botched Lasik procedures with new equipment and improved techniques, local eye surgeons are saying.

The advancements should give people considering Lasik renewed confidence that if something does go wrong, it could be righted, said Dr. Ming Wang, a Nashville eye surgeon. He noted that a vast majority of Lasik patients have no complications at all. Just two to three years ago, Wang was turning away a majority of patients who were seeking relief after surgeries gone awry. Now, he's able to help about 80 percent of those seeking corrective procedures, many traveling from out of state and even other countries, he said. "Nobody enjoys going in after someone else's botched surgery, but new technology is allowing us to put the pieces back together," said Dr. Danny Weikert, a Lasik surgeon at the Vanderbilt Eye Institute, where doctors have started doing more corrective surgeries in the past three to four years.

>> **SURGERY, 4D**

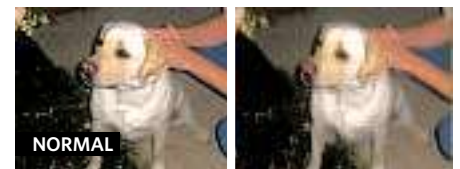
VISION PROBLEMS AFTER LASIK SURGERY

About 1 to 2 percent of Lasik surgery patients report **vision complications** afterward.

Halos



Double vision



Starbursts



Glare



SOURCE: Dr. Ming Wang

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"Your vision is your window to the world. When it's disturbed and can't be corrected, you feel so isolated and alone."

— BARBARA BERNEY, patient advocate

Problems after Lasik can be eased

» SURGERY FROM 1D

As for Roth, he showed up four days later at Wang's office hoping he could fix the problems caused by another eye doctor.

"It took a lot of soul-searching to go back for a second shot," Roth said. His first doctor erred while using a blade to cut the surface of his cornea. Roth was relieved that Wang used a laser for the process.

Even though going to Wang was more expensive, "I've had no complications," said Roth, who now has 20/20 vision. "The blurriness and pain are gone."

Techniques improve

About 700,000 Americans each year have Lasik surgery, which was approved by the Food and Drug Administration in 1999. About 10 million Lasik procedures have been performed in the United States in the past 15 years.

The procedure involves cutting a flap on the surface of the cornea, with a blade or laser, then using a laser to reshape the corneal tissues to correct nearsightedness, farsightedness or astigmatism.

Wang estimates a small number of patients, 1 to 2 percent, experience complications, leading to night vision difficulties such as halos, starburst and glare, along with double vision and dry eyes.

Most problems occur when surgeons are cutting the flap. Other problems arise when patients proceed with Lasik even though their eye geometry is not suitable for the

procedure. Still others experience difficulty during the healing process, Wang said.

New three-dimensional imaging machines that snap detailed photos of a patient's cornea are helping some doctors identify problem spots after a bungled procedure.

The 3-D machines also do a better job of screening out patients who shouldn't get Lasik in the first place, like those with certain corneal problems, Weikert said. Eye surgeons at Vanderbilt are also doing corrective surgeries using a process called surface ablation, which can be safer than traditional Lasik because there is no need to cut a corneal flap, he said.

"It is hard to completely eliminate the problem for most patients. But there is a substantial reduction of the problem. We can help."

— DR. MING WANG

Improved laser techniques are also helping surgeons repair mistakes, Wang said. In addition to corrective surgeries, patients can get fitted with special contact lenses or receive powerful doses of steroids to deal with complications.

"It is hard to completely eliminate the problem for most

patients," Wang said. "But there is a substantial reduction of the problem. We can help."

Problems are 'devastating'

Indeed, failed Lasik surgery can lead to depression, and, in some cases, suicide, said Barbara Berney, an advocate for patients who have had problems with vision surgery.

"You hear it advertised as nothing more than a manicure," Berney said. "I'm not anti-Lasik, but no one has done an in-depth study with people who have had complications, and until recently, no one would admit there are problems."

The Rockford, Ill., woman had a bad Lasik experience in 2001.

"My vision is awful and nothing can be done," she said. Her view of the world is "like looking through wrinkled wax paper." She can't see well enough to drive at night. Nonetheless, her surgeon considered her procedure a "success," she said. Thus, Berney believes the complication rate is higher than most doctors estimate.

The FDA is considering clearer warnings about Lasik and has made it easier for people to report problems (www.fda.gov/cdrh/lasik).

Rich McGowan of Murfreesboro said he was "seriously depressed" after losing vision in his left eye and experiencing blurriness in his right eye when corneal flaps tore during a Lasik procedure last year.

"I knew I was facing a long, uphill battle with my left eye, so I really needed the vision to be good in my right eye," the 42-year-old

father and farmer said. His loss of depth perception makes a favorite hobby, duck hunting, challenging.

He refused to go back to his original surgeon and is under the care of Wang, who helped him regain vision in his right eye with high-dose steroids. The doctor hopes a couple more surgeries next year will improve vision in the left eye.

Through the nonprofit Vision Surgery Rehab Network, Berney tries to give people referrals to doctors who can help, as well as validate their feelings of despair.

"So many patients who have complications hear from their surgeons, 'It's all in your head,'" Berney said. "The psychological impact of bad Lasik is devastating."

She sometimes refers patients to Wang and credits the Nashville doctor's work as a "step in the right direction." But, she says, many patients have complications that can't be corrected. Wang agrees that some complications are so severe there is little that can be done — but future advancements may one day be able to help.

Plus, Berney said, desperate patients often can't afford the follow-up corrective procedures, which can run from "several hundred to several thousand dollars," according to Wang. Lasik surgery, which is usually not covered by insurance, costs about \$2,000 to \$3,000 per eye.

"Your vision is your window to the world," Berney said. "When it's disturbed and can't be corrected, you feel so isolated and alone. Sometimes, I just cry with them."

Dancing brings joy to patients

» PARKINSON'S, 1D

caregivers, and I hear this live music, and I see all these different ages and disabilities dancing. It was gorgeous," says Morris.

Leventhal says the initial aim was to encourage movement and mostly to make something joyful happen.

"A lot of people have said, 'It's so wonderful, you're healing people.' That's flattering, but it's a dangerous slope," Leventhal says. "We're careful not to make any medical claims about the class. Its strength is that it's outside the clinical arena. For those 75 minutes, you don't have Parkinson's. You're a dancer."

Emphasis on balance

Unlike other classes at the school, students in the weekly class start seated. After warming up by performing basic moves that improve coordination, the dancers move to a ballet barre to focus on balance.

"We'll do ballet and tap exercises at the barre, then progress