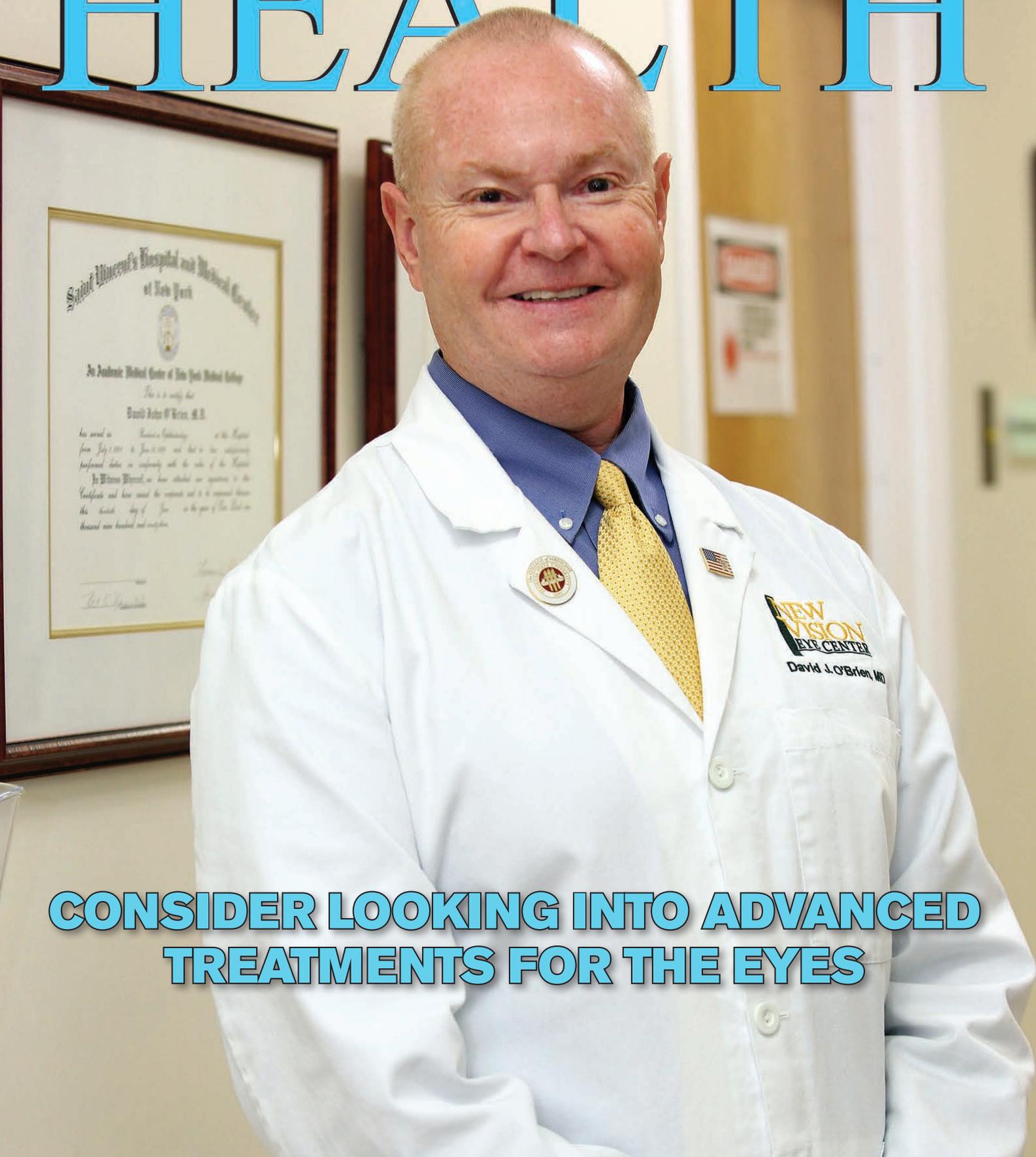


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HEALTH



CONSIDER LOOKING INTO ADVANCED TREATMENTS FOR THE EYES

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Consider looking into advanced treatments for the eyes

BY KERRY FIRTH
Correspondent

Eyes are often referred to as the window to your soul, but they also are undisputedly your window to the world, allowing you to experience the beauty of nature, a set of steps, traffic lights and the people you love. But what happens when your window to the world becomes blurry or distorted? Fortunately, rapidly advancing technology and skilled ophthalmologists and eye surgeons can in many cases restore damaged and aged eyes to improve and restore sight.

Dr. David J. O'Brien, medical director of the Laser Center at the New Vision Eye Center in Vero Beach, has advanced training in medical and surgical management of corneal disease and refractive laser vision correction. He specializes in treatment of corneal disorder and external diseases of the eye, and is proficient in Laser Vision Correction through LASIK and Advanced Surface Treatment, Astigmatic Keratotomy and Conductive Keratoplasty.

"The most common condition we treat is dry eye, a condition that occurs when your eyes aren't able to provide adequate lubrication," said Dr. O'Brien. "Patients will complain of a burning sensation, excessive tearing and fluctuating vision.

"The fact is that we are all just too busy and we may be watching TV, surfing the web, and sending text messages simultaneously, and this strains the eyes. Certain medications like antihistamines, decongestants and antidepressants can lead to dry eye, as well as aggressive use of certain eye whitener drops and viral infections. Even a blasting ceiling fan contributes to this common disorder.

"Dry eye is a natural part of the aging process," continued Dr. O'Brien. "Tear production tends to diminish as you get older, and dry eye is common in people over 50. A lack of tears is more common in women, especially if they are experiencing hormonal changes due to pregnancy, using birth control pills or menopause.



Dr. David J. O'Brien.
PHOTOS: KAILA JONES

It can also be brought on by wearing contact lenses or having a history of refractive surgery."

Dry eyes can make it difficult to perform everyday activities such as reading or working on a computer. If left untreated, the condition can lead to eye inflammation, abrasion of the corneal surface, corneal ulcers and vision loss.

The first line of therapy for dry eye is adding artificial tears, preferably with name-brand drops that are preservative free. The oral use of Omega-3 found in fish oil and flaxseed oil is also a recommended as treatment.

In addition, for people with poor tear production, special medications can be prescribed to help the patient produce more tears. And punctal plugs are frequently used to plug the drainage system where tears exit the eye, to help keep tears the patient produces in the eye.

Patients also can take a few proactive steps on their own to ward off dry eyes. Direct blowing air from fans, air conditioners, heaters and even hair dryers away from your eyes. Wear wraparound sunglasses or other protective eyewear. Take eye breaks and blink a few times if you're reading or doing another task that requires visual concentration. Position your computer screen below eye level so you won't open your eyes as wide. Stop smoking and use artificial tears regularly.

Blepharoplasty, or eyelid surgery,

is another common procedure performed by Dr. O'Brien. As you age, your eyelids stretch, and the muscles supporting them weaken. As the eyelids drop, they can inhibit peripheral vision and impact activities like reading or playing sports. If your eyelids are blocking your upper visual field, your procedure may be classified as medically necessary and covered by insurance. Your doctor evaluates the condition and health of your eyes and then determines if the sagging eyelids are affecting your eyesight.

"In order to qualify for insurance coverage, your eyelids need to be low enough to block your upper visual field," said Dr. O'Brien. "We quantify this with photos and a formal field test which involves measuring the lids in their natural state and again when they are taped up to a certain height. If lifting the eyelid improves the sight, then it will be covered by most insurances."

Eyelid surgery not only enhances sight by removing excess skin and fat that is obstructing your vision, but it also has an aesthetic benefit. Patients look refreshed and younger. "The desired result is to look natural and expand your line of vision," explained Dr. O'Brien. "You don't want to overcompensate for normal aging. The biggest concern during eyelid surgery is that the eyes won't close completely. As a cornea specialist, I deal with people who have severe dryness of their eyes as

a result of overly aggressive eyelid surgery."

Cataracts are another common eye problem among those 65 and older. Cataracts cause the lens of your eyes to become cloudy or blurry, and surgery is the only treatment option available for this condition. During the surgery, the clouded natural lens of the eye is replaced with a new, clear lens called an intraocular lens implant. The new lens has a prescription power specifically measured and designed for each individual patient.

"Cataract surgery is a miraculous procedure for people who have aging changes that are inevitable," explained Dr. O'Brien. "We all develop cataracts eventually, but whether it is visually significant will determine if it's necessary to operate. The implants last a lifetime and are very stable inside the eye. It's actually the most commonly done surgery in the United State and one with amazing results."

Meanwhile, LASIK surgery treats vision problems like nearsightedness, farsightedness and astigmatism by using a laser to permanently reshape the natural cornea, which adjusts how the eye focuses.

Nearsightedness can be fixed by increasing the curve of the cornea while farsightedness can be fixed by flattening the cornea. Astigmatism can be treated by smoothing out irregularities of the cornea.

Surprisingly, life-altering LASIK surgery is an outpatient procedure that typically takes 15 minutes or less. Dr. O'Brien is a fellowship trained refractive surgeon who has performed more than 11,000 LASIK specific procedures.

Dr. O'Brien is board certified by the American Board of Ophthalmology, a fellow of the American Academy of Ophthalmology, fellow of the American College of surgeons, member of the International Society of Refractive Surgery, member of the American Society of Cataract and Refractive Surgeons, and member of the Castroviejo Cornea Society. He can be reached for consultation at New Vision Eye Center, 1055 37th Place, Vero Beach, 772- 257-8700. ■