

Krieger Eye

Advancing eye disease care

Ten years ago, a diagnosis of retinal disease might have meant the end of functional vision and giving up routine activities like reading and driving.

But ophthalmologists at Sinai Hospital are limiting vision loss and giving patients new hope, thanks to the success patients are experiencing with less invasive treatments.

“We have more elegant ways of addressing these diseases now,” says J. B. Harlan, M.D., an ophthalmologist at Sinai’s Krieger Eye Institute. “What we are seeing is a move away from lasers toward medications.”

There are two major forms of retinal disease: diabetic retinopathy, which can lead to total blindness in patients with high blood sugar; and macular degeneration, an age-related condition that affects straight-ahead vision needed for everyday activities.

High blood sugar damages blood vessels in the retina—essentially the film where the eye captures images for recognition. If the vessels begin to leak or swell, patients can develop edema, which blurs vision.

In other cases, the blood vessels don’t function at all and leave blind patches. This may stimulate the growth of new vessels that cause bleeding and scar tissue, a disease known as proliferative retinopathy.

Until recently, the only treatment for diabetic retinopathy was laser surgery. It shrinks unneeded blood vessels but can also damage peripheral vision because of the number of laser burns required. Today, doctors are using steroid compounds to address edema and studying the effects of other oral and injected medications on proliferative retinopathy.

According to the National Eye Institute, 15 percent of Americans 75 or older have macular degeneration. The dry version of this disease causes cells under the retina to wither away, leading to blurred vision in the central line of sight. The dry form of macular degeneration can advance to wet, where abnormal blood vessels begin to grow beneath the macula at the back of the eye, “like weeds growing up below a sidewalk and disturbing the concrete,” Dr. Harlan says.

New treatments allow patients with advanced symptoms to keep their vision longer. The Food and Drug Administration recently approved Macugen, a medicine that blocks the stimulus that encourages blood vessel growth. It is injected directly into the eye, a fact that intimidates some patients.

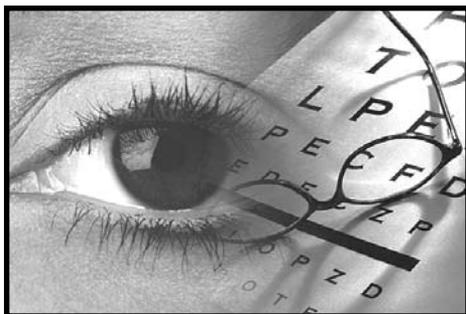
“It can be done with almost no discomfort, in the office, with little anesthesia. There’s also a minimal risk of infection or inadvertent damage to the eye,” says Dr. Harlan.

Dr. Harlan says that most insurance companies cover

treatments every six weeks or so. Even with regular injections, patients shouldn’t expect to see their vision improve. Rather, Macugen “puts the brakes” on the disease’s progression.

“Advances in the treatment of eye disease are tremendous if we look at what we are able to do now compared to what we could do five to 10 years ago,” Dr. Harlan says.

For more information about eye disease and the Krieger Eye Institute at Sinai Hospital, call 410.601.WELL (9355).



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