

From Drs. Fine, Hoffman, & Packer

PRESBYOPIA

Presbyopia (pres-bee-OH-pee-uh) is a loss in focusing ability that comes with getting older, and everyone must put up with it eventually. (The word is from the Greek and means "old sight.") Most people are between the ages of 40 and 50 when they first become aware that they are losing the ability to see objects or reading matter close to their eyes. The print in the telephone book becomes "too small" to read. They have to hold the newspaper farther from their eyes to see it clearly. At the same time, their focus for distant objects remains normal.

Presbyopia is certainly a nuisance, but it is not dangerous. It is a normal, inevitable part of reaching middle age, and it is no more abnormal than gray hair. Try to think of it as "growing up."

Early Signs

In the early stages of presbyopia, your eyes may become tired after a long period of close work. You may notice that when you read, the print becomes blurry and it is hard to clear it up. You may have difficulty shifting your focus from near to far - when you look up from reading, your distance vision may stay blurred for several seconds or even minutes before it clears. You may even start to fall asleep when you try to read for any length of time. These symptoms worsen later in the day, when you are tired. They can be reduced somewhat by using good lighting for reading and other close work.

Eventually, your zone of clear close-up vision moves so far from your eyes that you can no longer read comfortably. (That's when your arms seems to be too short!)

What Causes Presbyopia?

In young people, the lens within the eye is soft and flexible. Its shape can change readily - which changes its optical power - to enable the eye to accommodate (change focus) quickly and automatically between close-up and faraway objects. With increasing age, the lens gradually loses its flexibility, which results in a decreased ability to focus at close range. At the same time, there is a progressive decline in the strength of the focusing muscle within the eye, and this adds to the difficulty in seeing close-up objects clearly.

Optical Correction

Whenever the time comes that your eyes can no longer generate enough extra optical power to focus up close, you will need optical help. As focusing ability continues to decline, you will probably need to have the lenses changed every few years. Then, sometime between the ages of 65 and 70, just about all the near-focusing power will be gone. From then on, your prescription for reading will stay pretty much the same.

People sometimes notice that their presbyopia gets "worse" after they start wearing reading glasses, and they believe that the glasses are responsible. The fact is, presbyopia will "worsen" whether you wear glasses or not, and putting off the use of corrective lenses will not slow down the presbyopia.

Other Thoughts and Information

Whether you are nearsighted, farsighted, astigmatic, or have perfect vision without glasses, you will still become presbyopic by middle age. However, near- and farsightedness can affect the time when symptoms actually begin - usually earlier (younger) if you are farsighted, later if you are nearsighted.

Presbyopia is due to a normal aging change in the structures within the eye, and it affects everyone. Nothing you can do will prevent it, and nothing, including eye exercises or medication, will cure it. The only effective "treatment" for presbyopia is to wear proper glasses or contact lenses.