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From Dr. Fine, Hoffman, & Sims

TRIFOCALS

The word "trifocal" means, simply, that there are three different lens powers incorporated into an eyeglass lens, each providing a different zone of focus. (Bifocals have two lens powers.) Each lens power permits a small range in which everything you see will be sharp, but objects located in front of or behind that range will be out-of-focus.

How Are Trifocals Helpful?

As you grow older and start noticing a loss in focusing power (presbyopia), you will require stronger optical power in your eyeglasses for reading and other close work. That power is supplied in the lower segment of a bifocal lens, which will permit clear vision in the range of 12 to 18 inches (reading distance) while the upper part of the lens carries your regular distance correction. If you have not had presbyopia very long, you will be able to see everything beyond 18 inches through your distance correction.

Later on, however, as you lose even more of your focusing ability, you will find there is an in-between area that you can't see clearly, through either your distance correction or bifocal segment (you have to move closer or farther away.) This is the intermediate zone -- about 18 to 26 inches from your eyes. A trifocal solves the problem. In a trifocal, a third lens power is inserted directly above the bifocal segment, which is designed to be in focus for the intermediate distance of 18 to 26 inches.

Should You Wear Trifocals?

You should consider trifocals if you continually have difficulty seeing or performing visual tasks in the range of 18 to 26 inches. This is the distance for seeing computer screens, copy for typing, labels and prices on grocery shelves, music on a music stand or piano, and anything on a table.

Another type of eyeglass that can serve the same function as trifocals for most people is called a progressive power (or "invisible") bifocal. The blending of the two different power zones (for reading and distance) creates a broad, intermediate transition zone that functions as a trifocal, but there are no dividing lines between the segments. The blending creates a gradually changing focus that gives you more flexibility in seeing well at different distances.

If you do get trifocals or progressive power bifocals, don't "fight" them. They require a little more patience in getting used to, but most people adapt quickly and once they do, will not part with them. It is best to view all of these applications as "tools," necessary for your daily living and occupational needs.