

A person who passes the screening test can be assured of an 85 to 90 percent chance of never having to wear glasses or contact lenses again following the surgery, according to Fine and O'Dell.

Of those who are nearsighted, about 75 percent are likely candidates for RK, O'Dell says.

But not everyone has this kind of enthusiasm for the procedure.

Scott MacRae, a corneal specialist who performs RKs at the Oregon Health Sciences University in Portland, says only those who can't tolerate glasses or contact lenses should be considered for the operation because of uncertainty with long-term effects.

"I'll talk two out of three patients out of the procedure because they are not good candidates," MacRae says. He adds that most people have unrealistic expectations of the procedure.

Like MacRae, Robert Davis, a Eugene ophthalmologist, is concerned about the procedure's long-term effects. He has decided not to perform RKs because the possible long-term risks are unknown and may be significant, he says.

One concern is the fear of farsightedness developing in RK patients years later, Davis says.

possibility is remote for those who pass the screening process.

"We know what measurements to take on the cornea and what measurements to follow over a period of time."

"We now have five to six years of follow-up on patients to recognize that there is no progressive change telling us that

you happen to be one of them, it's very significant," he says.

Fine says the percentage of patients who may become infected is miniscule. There are five or six cases of late infection out of several hundred thousand RK operations, he says.

"Many more people get sight-threatening or eye-threatening

'I am very concerned that patients who have it (RK), who later on in life have an increase in their intraocular pressure — that is the pressure within the eye — are very liable to have stretching of the incisions, which will result in them becoming markedly farsighted.'

— Robert Davis

sometime down the road we're going to get into trouble," Fine adds.

Fluctuating vision is another concern regarding the procedure, MacRae says. Most eye specialists think this fluctuation is due to changes in the corneal thickness, he says, and he is concerned that it might have negative long-term effects on the cornea.

But O'Dell downplays the problem.

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— Howard Fine

"I am very concerned that patients who have it (RK), who later on in life have an increase in their intraocular pressure — that is the pressure within the eye — are very liable to have stretching of the incisions, which will result in them becoming markedly farsighted," Davis says.

"I think it's a real concern, and a significant although small percentage of patients will develop increased pressure 20 to 30 years later," Davis says. "There is no way to know how they will do."

Although Fine acknowledges the possibility of patients becoming farsighted as a result of the surgery, he says the

"Fluctuations past three or four months are very uncommon," he says, adding that if it does occur, it usually is gradual and not debilitating.

"It is a morning-to-evening type thing. When they wake up in the morning, generally speaking, their vision is a little bit blurry. It clears up in about a half hour. Later that night their vision can go a bit blurry, too," O'Dell says.

The possibility of infection also concerns Davis.

"Some incisions never heal, even years later," he says, which increases the chance of infection.

"This only happens in a small percentage of cases, but if

infections from contact lens," Fine notes.

One of Davis' biggest objections to RK is the way it is promoted.

"There are those ophthalmologists who refer to the procedure as a simple, small type of surgery. If you consider the whole body, it is that. But on the cornea of the eye, it is a major surgery," Davis says.

"Usually eight incisions are made, almost full thickness through the cornea. That is a major onslaught onto the human cornea and may have devastating results later on potentially," Davis says.

Fine agrees the decision to have an RK should be made carefully. He offers several points of advice for those considering a radial keratotomy:

- Go to every RK screening available. All ophthalmologists that perform RKs offer free screenings, he says.

- Make sure to pursue follow-up care.

- Talk to previous patients about the procedure and the care they received afterward.

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