

Multifocal Contacts a Good Option for Some, not All, Patients

Patients who do well with multifocal contact lenses — designed to provide mostly glasses-free vision up close, far away and in between — love the freedom from their glasses, reports Dr. Meiya Liao, Coastal Eye optometrist.

“My goal with multifocals is to give the patient functional vision that gets them through the majority of their tasks throughout the majority of their day without the use of glasses,” she says. “My emphasis is on meeting everyday visual demands. They are a good lens option for those who need to have objects simultaneously in focus over a large range of viewing distances.”

Dr. Liao also says this is a great lens for someone who is active and always on the go and does not want to be bothered with glasses. The lenses are also good for patients who want to use them primarily for social occasions without their glasses.

However, she says, the multifocal contacts are not for everyone. Patients who have visual demands that depend on resolving fine detail at both far and near for extended periods of time are not good candidates for multifocal lenses. For example, this is not the right lens for someone who spends the entire day driving for a living, or focused on a computer screen, or scrutinizing small numbers at a desk. They are in many ways a compromise that can provide pretty good vision at multiple distances, but not perfect vision for all.

Realistic Expectations are Important

It’s important for patients to have realistic expectations, she says. “That’s the key to a successful fit. Multifocal contact lenses are not designed to give the patient better vision than they have with glasses. They are designed to give the patient freedom from their glasses for the majority of the day. I will sometimes prescribe reading or distance glasses to use over these lenses for optimal vision for specialized visual tasks or lighting conditions. This is helpful if a patient wants to sit and read for a several hours at a time or goes on a long road trip.”

Fitting multifocal contacts involves some trial and error to find the particular design that works best for the individual patient. Dr. Liao also often sends patients home with trial multifocal lenses so they can test out how the lenses work for them in the “real world.”

“This is often different from how well they can read the letter chart in the office,” she says. “What I always want to know is how the patient is actually functioning with the lenses.”

The cost of multifocal contacts is higher than standard contacts because of the greater time and expertise required for fitting them properly, as well as the cost of the more sophisticated lenses. For patients who really want to minimize their need for glasses, however, the benefits can be well worth it.