

EYE-Q

by R. Thomas Barowsky, MD

Assistance is Available for Low Vision Patients

Research to Prevent Blindness and the National Eye Institute of the National Institutes of Health have recognized February as Macular Degeneration and Low Vision Awareness Month. I have covered the major causes of low vision and vision loss over the past several weeks so, today we will look at what aids and assistance are available to the sight impaired.

The internet is a good place to start in finding resources for the visually impaired. There are sites dedicated to all sorts of vision assisting devices from simple magnifiers to closed circuit television (CCTV) reading devices. Many of these sites are purely commercial and are there to sell devices and make a profit. Many are also very informative and will help direct you to agencies for the sight impaired as well as reviews on many of the devices available to assist the sight impaired to enjoy a more fulfilling life.

WWW.lowvision.org is a good starting point for those looking for information about low vision education and assistance. This site is sponsored by the Internet Low Vision Society and is supported by the Low Vision Center of Indiana. The site does not endorse any one approach or product over another but strives to give a general overview of what is available to assist the sight impaired.

Research to Prevent Blindness also carries an informative website to help educate patients and their family regarding low vision and eye disease. The North Carolina chapter is located in Raleigh and can be found on the internet at www.preventblindness.org/nc.

A number of websites sell just about anything you can think of to assist with everyday tasks. From oversized remotes for the TV and oversized pushbutton phones to intricate electronic magnifiers and CCTVs.

Of special interest, are the new electronic magnifiers which use the same technology as the popular digital cameras. They provide high quality resolution, have zoom capabilities for the really fine print and provide a variety of color combinations to assist in enhancing the image being viewed. A simple push of the button can reverse the image from black print on a white background to white print on a black background or any of a variety of colors. There is at least one device that acts like a pair of binoculars to bring distant images closer or convert to a variable magnifier for reading or close work. All of these devices benefit from newer electronic advances to provide a much lighter weight device with higher quality image than the traditional glass magnifier. They are certainly easier to carry around than the older video cameras of the CCTV devices.

Before investing in any of these devices, it is important to have a complete evaluation by your ophthalmologist to help you to determine your needs and to refine your expectations. It is not necessary to buy a \$600 electronic device when all you need is a \$30 - \$40 magnifier.

With assistance from your eye doctor and with a little research it is possible for the sight impaired to continue to enjoy some level of vision that was not available before. The real trick is using a little common sense and having realistic expectations.

If you have questions about your eye health e-mail Dr. Barowsky at doctom@tdkj.com and we'll try to answer your questions here at Eye-Q.