

What is Keratoconus?

Keratoconus (Greek: kerato- cornea; and Latin: conus cone), is a degenerative non-inflammatory disorder of the eye (specifically the cornea) in which structural changes within the collagen of the cornea cause the cornea to thin. This thinning produces an unstable conical shape. Keratoconus can cause symptoms such as distortion of vision, discomfort, and sensitivity to light. Keratoconus is considered rare though it is among the most common corneal dystrophies, affecting by some estimates around one person in a thousand. It is typically diagnosed in the patient's adolescent years and will generally progress until it attains its most debilitating state in the twenties and thirties.

As important as the question, “What is keratoconus?”, is the treatments that can be used to improve keratoconus. At one time, an invasive corneal transplant was the only option for treating keratoconus. Today specialist surgeons are increasingly using intacs for keratoconus as well as a variety of new methods. Intacs are prescription inserts and are an exciting new option between contacts and a corneal transplant that may be the best possible option to stabilize the cornea and improve vision for people with keratoconus. Intacs for keratoconus are indicated when contact lenses and glasses are no longer suitable.

After asking, “What is keratoconus?” one should also ask where to go for treatment of keratoconus. Dr. Dan Langley was among the first surgeons in the country to use this type of treatment since being approved by the FDA in 2004 and has had excellent results. Using intacs for keratoconus offers an exciting new treatment for a disease that can often be both difficult to detect and even more difficult to treat.

While EyeCare Associates offers intacs for keratoconus, there are other possible treatments and it is important that you discuss these options with a trained eye care professional in order to receive the best possible advice. After a complete eye exam, the doctor can discuss with you the best possible method for treating keratoconus. In cases where keratoconus has progressed substantially, the surgeon might recommend intacs for keratoconus. In cases with less progression, other options might be presented.

Symptoms of keratoconus

Symptoms of keratoconus generally begin in later teenage years. Some practitioners believe that the symptoms of keratoconus begin once growth stops, between 16 and 21 years of age. The first symptoms of keratoconus could be itching or allergies. This itching causes patients to rub their eyes more frequently and more forcefully. Studies show that patients who rub their eyes are more likely to develop keratoconus. During this same period of time, patients with keratoconus will discover that they need to change their glasses more frequently. Astigmatism and myopia might increase dramatically.

In addition to discomfort and changes in prescription, other symptoms of keratoconus might manifest themselves early in the progression of the disease. Patients might discover a decrease in visual acuity. Uncorrected astigmatism can make vision blurry at all distances so there is not a good clear point of vision. Another symptom of keratoconus is “squinting”. As patients squint they can put pressure on the curvature of the eye and correct the astigmatism as well as decrease the size of the aperture. Both of these effects result in improved vision. Some patients with keratoconus walk around in a perpetual squint.

Photophobia as well as glare and haloes are also typical symptoms of keratoconus. An unhealthy cornea will typically react to discomfort when affected by light. Patients with keratoconus will often describe this photophobia as an increasing discomfort in sunlight or other bright light. Glare and haloes are particularly bothersome while driving at night. With irregularity in the cornea, typical symptoms of keratoconus also include ghosting, double vision (which persists even when one eye is covered (monocular diplopia), as well as obvious visual distortion that may cause multiple images.

While these symptoms of keratoconus are used in the diagnosis of keratoconus, these symptoms could also indicate other vision problems. Keratoconus requires a diagnosis from a competent eye doctor who is trained in not only recognizing the symptoms but also observing signs of keratoconus through direct measurement as well as inspection of the cornea at a microscopic level. Simply recognizing symptoms does not by itself diagnose keratoconus.

If you believe that you manifest some of these signs of keratoconus, it is important that you meet with a health care professional and undergo a complete eye examination. Dr. Dan Langley is a certified Ophthalmologist and has had specific training in the cornea. EyeCare Associates would be happy to investigate your concerns and discover the best method for treating your problems. EyeCare Associates can help investigate your symptoms of keratoconus and make an accurate diagnosis of your eye problems.

