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From Dr. Fine, Hoffman, & Packer

PROGRESSIVE POWER BIFOCALS

Progressive power bifocals are eyeglasses that incorporate two optical corrections - one for distance vision and one for reading, just as in regular bifocals. The obvious difference is the absence of a dividing line between the joined lenses. Instead of a line, the two lens powers have been blended in such a way as to create a gradual power change from the top of the lens to the bottom.

Most people find these marvels of optical engineering wonderful and comfortable. But getting used to them may be a little more difficult than getting used to regular bifocals, so you need to be patient and wear them for a week or two. Most people are glad they made the extra effort to adapt to them.

What Are the Advantages?

Most people feel that bifocals make them look older. "Progressives," on the other hand, do not look like bifocals, so it is not apparent that you have reached the bifocal age. This is frequently the primary reason for choosing them.

Regular bifocals have a sharp dividing line and an abrupt image "jump" from the upper part to the lower, and many people find both of these to be annoying. Neither problem exists when you wear progressive power glasses.

Although regular bifocals permit clear distance and near vision, they do not enable some wearers to see at an intermediate (arm's length) distance. With progressive power lenses, you can see clearly at all distances, since their blended transition zone allows for a gradual change of focus. Thus, they are often a good substitute for trifocals.

What Are the Disadvantages?

Three differences from standard bifocals and trifocals could be considered disadvantages: the cost of the lenses is considerably higher, it takes time to adapt to new ways of looking through the lenses if you have been wearing regular bifocals, and the fitting by the optician is more critical.

You may have a slight "swimming" sensation or a visual distortion when you look to the side without turning your head, so you have to get used to turning your head. There is also a small "sweet spot" or best area through the lens for each distance range, so you have to learn how to use it to your advantage. The necessary adaptations become automatic after a week or two of full-time wear.

The lens placement in front of the eyes is critically important, and any error in the fitting can make these glasses unusable. (Problems caused by fitting errors are sometimes wrongly blamed on the lenses.) Therefore, the dispenser you select must be experienced in fitting them and must take great care in measuring a number of important optical details.

Other Information

You will need to buy the glasses from a person of integrity and reputation because some brands of progressives are less expensive imitations of excellent ones. The brand specified (on the prescription) may be easier for you to adapt to, and you can't tell by looking at the glasses themselves if an inferior pair has been substituted. So, the fitter needs to be trustworthy as well as capable.

Progressive power bifocals may not be advisable - and in many cases not even available - if you have a very large amount of nearsightedness, farsightedness, or astigmatism or have a large difference in optical power requirements for the two eyes.