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News

## San Mateo County doctor's research points to bifocal contacts for kids

By **MIKE ROSENBERG** | Bay Area News Group

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Foster City resident Rosalind Chin had been taking her son, Shawn, to get stronger glasses every six months since he was 3 years old.

At age 10, Shawn, whose nearsightedness had increasingly blurred distant objects as he got older, went to see San Bruno-based optometrist Thomas Aller, who has devoted his life to myopia. Aller gave Shawn bifocal contact lenses, and for the past five years his vision problems have completely stabilized.

“We thought he was going to go blind,” said Rosalind Chin, whose other son, 13-year-old Brendon, went through nearly the same experience until trying bifocal contacts. “They’re doing very well with it.”

Aller is pushing the medical community to dump glasses and regular contacts for nearsighted kids and teens and instead prescribe bifocal contact lenses.

If right, his work could prove instrumental in improving the nation's eyesight. About 42 percent of Americans suffer from myopia, up from 25 percent in 1979, according to the National Eye Institute. Some believe the increase is tied to the surge in close-up work involving computers, smart phones, video games and other electronics.

Aller, 52, has been studying myopia for 20 years and has run tests on the contacts for the past decade with a pair of UC Berkeley doctors.

After a successful seven-year study, he obtained a grant from a Johnson & Johnson contact lens maker for a randomized controlled study in 2004 in which neither he nor the patients knew who was wearing the regular contacts or the bifocal contacts.

Of the 90 patients ages 8-18 studied, the ones who wore bifocal contacts saw their myopia problems slow at a rate of 90 percent. Some who wore the bifocals actually improved vision. It was the first research of its kind, but the company, Vistakon Pharmaceuticals, declined to publish the full study in a medical journal.

Perhaps the most telling was his work with a pair of local 12-year-old identical female twins with the exact same vision and myopia problems.

Aller gave one girl regular contacts and the other bifocal lenses. A year later, the girl who wore the bifocal contact lenses actually had slightly better vision, while the twin with regular contacts had her nearsighted problems double.

“So they were not identical anymore,” said Aller, who published the twin findings in 2007. Both now wear the bifocals, and their myopia has stabilized.

Aller secured a patent on the diagnosis method and, working with Australia-based Vision Cooperative Research Center, hopes to bring his own brand of contacts through CIBA Vision, a major worldwide contact maker, to the market this year. They still need FDA approval.

While bifocal contacts have been available since the 1990s to correct short-term vision problems, Aller said his lenses are designed based on his research specifically to slow or even halt myopia problems in adolescents. Essentially, they are engineered to focus light throughout the retina, rather than just the center.

Of course, the lenses can't work magic for sight problems that already exist. But preventing the worsening of sight can sometimes provide a lift mentally and socially, especially when it means kids don't have to wear glasses.

Shawn Chin, for instance, is now free to play badminton and basketball without glasses, while his brother, Brendan, can play soccer without the frames.

“It really works,” Rosalind Chin said.

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