

Singer Bonnie Tyler tells how laser eye surgery saved her from a...

By Bonnie Estridge

She was a singing legend with a string of hits to her name. What no one knew was that Bonnie Tyler had such poor eyesight she couldn't even read her lyrics, or put on her stage make-up without using a magnifying glass.

Her severe long-sightedness meant that the 57-year-old, best known for her No 1 hit Total Eclipse Of The Heart, suffered both professionally and personally.

'For the past ten years or so, seeing anything close-up was so difficult that it became a real issue in my life,' Bonnie says. 'Holding a menu at arm's length, peering at anything that required reading, made me feel so old,' she says. 'I lost dozens of pairs of expensive glasses because I'd put them down and then not be able to find them again.'

Bonnie's poor vision even began to have a detrimental effect on her work. 'When I was in the recording studio I needed to concentrate on what my voice was doing, which is rather difficult if you can't actually see what you are supposed to be singing,' she says.

The medical term for long-sightedness is hyperopia, which is when the eyeball is too short in length or the cornea is too flat. As a result, objects that are close by appear fuzzy or blurred.

While surgical treatment for short-sightedness – myopia – has been available for some years, when Bonnie tried to discover if there was a similar procedure that might benefit her, she found nothing.

Bonnie is still touring all over the world from her home in Portugal where she lives with her property developer husband Robert Sullivan. But it wasn't until she was in Britain last year on tour that she learned about the procedure that would free her from, as she puts it, 'peering at everything like an old lady'.

'A friend suggested I see Professor Dan Reinstein. I went to his London clinic for four hours of tests to see if there was a reason I shouldn't have the surgery – if I'd had underlying eye disease, for example. I was given the all-clear and was operated on the following morning.'

Dr Reinstein, professor of ophthalmology in refractive surgery, developed the procedure Laser Blended Vision in collaboration with Carl Zeiss, the German manufacturers of optical systems. It aims to correct eyesight for those typically over 45 years of age. It is only available privately and costs from £4,600. 'Bonnie had two conditions that were corrected by laser eye surgery. She was long-sighted but she also had astigmatism – where the cornea is shaped like a rugby ball rather than a football as it should be,' says Dr Reinstein.

She also has presbyopia which is part of the ageing process and literally means 'old sight'.

With presbyopia, the ability to focus on close objects gradually decreases over a number of years, owing to the internal lens of the eye losing the ability to change shape in order to shift the focus of the eye from distance to near. Reading glasses help, and Bonnie started to need them about ten years before normal-sighted people would.

The Blended Vision procedure takes a few minutes for each eye. Anaesthetic drops are used to numb the eye. A laser then creates tiny perforations along the surface of the cornea and the sur-

Total eclipse of my sight

In focus: the corrective techniques

- Laser eye surgery can be used to treat myopia (short-sight), hyperopia (long-sight) and presbyopia ('ageing eyes' that require bifocals) as well as astigmatism, in which the eye is irregularly shaped.
- The most popular and advanced type is LASIK – laser-assisted in situ keratomileusis – introduced in 1996.
- LASEK – laser-assisted epithelial keratomileusis – in which the flap cut is from the protective layer over the eye (the epithelium) and not the cornea, is used when the cornea is too thin for LASIK therapy.
- PRK – photorefractive keratectomy – the original laser refractive surgery technique in which no corneal flap is cut, is rarely used today.
- Royal College of Ophthalmologists' guidelines say patients should expect to see the surgeon for a consultation and be given time to think before booking surgery.
- Patients should be seen by the surgeon 48 hours after surgery, then after a month and after three months.
- Laser surgery can lead to 'corneal ectasia', where fluid pressure builds up, and a corneal transplant is required to correct it.
- Ninety per cent of patients report having close to perfect sight afterwards.



VISION ON: Bonnie was long-sighted until the pioneering 20-minute op

geon uses these perforations to separate the micro-thin flap from the cornea. A second laser is then used to reshape the corneal tissue. The flap is replaced into its original position, now taking the new shape of the cornea and focusing the eye.

'The flap sticks to the corneal surface and after two to three hours is completely healed,' says Dr Reinstein. 'The patient may feel slight discomfort, similar to having worn contact lenses for too long, for a couple of hours before this settles and then the eye feels normal.'

'Changes in the cornea will be permanent, but presbyopia progresses inside the eye over the decades as we get older. The great thing is that a simple adjustment can be made by further laser surgery to adjust for any later changes in the eye,' he says.

Bonnie recalls feeling some pressure on the eyes during the procedure, 'but nothing else, and definitely no pain'. And she was delighted with the results: 'Afterwards the clock face in the surgery was perfectly clear; I could even see the second hand going round – just 20 minutes after the start of surgery there was no blurring, nothing. I could see everything close-up and I have been able to do so ever since.'

Dr Reinstein says all laser eye surgery is permanent, 'but as we age, we may need a minor top-up every ten years'. In a study pre-

sented at the 2008 American Academy of Ophthalmology in Atlanta, he showed that of 336 consecutive patients treated, 96 per cent could see 20/20 or better at distance and 100 per cent were able to read newsprint without glasses.

'How many times one can be treated depends on the prescription level, the thickness of the cornea and the equipment being used,' he says, 'but most patients can be treated and adjusted sufficiently during their lifetimes to keep them out of glasses.'

'There are other forms of treatment for presbyopia. The most common in the UK is the implantation of an artificial lens into the eye but this carries a slightly higher risk than laser eye surgery which is performed on the surface of the eye.'

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How to keep your gut in mint condition



By Caroline Bellamy

Even as far back as ancient Greece, herbal practitioners have pointed towards the peppermint plant – mentha piperita – as a cure for digestive disorders. Now scientific research is backing up some of their claims.

Last week, the British Medical Journal reported that almost half of sufferers of Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) found their symptoms disappeared after taking peppermint oil.

Symptoms of IBS include severe abdominal cramps as well as gastric problems and the condition affects about eight million people in the UK. But because the exact cause is not understood, it is often difficult to treat.

Peppermint oil is a pure oil extracted from the peppermint plant. Its constituents include the organic compounds menthol, menthone and eucalyptol, which have a wide range of pharmaceutical uses – as topical pain relievers and decongestants, among others.

It can be taken as neat oil in water or as Colpermin, a prescription or over-the-counter drug with an enteric coating so that it dissolves in the intestines rather than the stomach.

'Nearly all my patients who have taken peppermint oil have had some relief from their bowel problems,' says nutritionist Antony Haynes, of the Harley Street Nutrition Clinic, in London.

'One theory is that it blocks the calcium channels in the gut. Calcium and magnesium are both vital for the constriction of muscle, so if you're suffering from spasms in the bowel it may have a relaxing effect.'

Dr Alexander Ford, honorary specialist registrar in gastroenterology at St James's Hospital in Leeds, led the recent study.

'This research gives some hope to sufferers because peppermint oil is cheap and safe,' he says.

'Some studies suggest the oil causes the smooth muscle in the bowel to relax. The smooth muscle propels contents through by contracting and relaxing in segments. When this muscle spasms, the result can be pain, gastric problems, or abnormal bacteria in the gut.'

There may be side effects. The BMJ reports that as many as three in ten people taking peppermint oil had problems such as heartburn, blurred vision and feeling sick.

Each case of IBS is very different, so it's wise to seek medical advice about dosages.

DOCTOR DOCTOR

Q How can I change my GP and do I have to give a reason?

A You can change by registering at a new surgery and the notes are automatically transferred. You do not have to give a reason to the new or the old GP. You can find a new GP in your area at www.nhs.uk.