

Jan. 14 -- **Some tiny pieces of plastic offer new hope to people who suffer from a debilitating genetic condition that could leave them blind. Dr. Dean Edell shows us how it works.**



ABC7 NEWS TEAM
Dr. Dean Edell,
Medical Reporter

Although Cynthia Ramirez looks healthy enough, recently she discovered she has a serious eye condition. One that could soon leave her legally blind.

Cynthia Ramirez, eye patient: "I first noticed I was having difficulty focusing. My eyes weren't focusing on like the signs. I wasn't able to see like if I was driving. I wasn't able to see like the signs on the road."

When reading became difficult and she had become dependent on others for everything, she went to eye doctor and found she had a disease called keratoconus.

With keratoconus, the center of the cornea becomes thinner and exceedingly pointy, making it difficult to focus.

Cynthia Ramirez: "I did notice that my contacts ... I was ripping them frequently and I was, because now I realize it was because the shape of my eye was changing."

The problem is that for many patients with keratoconus, the disease progresses so that glasses or contacts no longer do the trick. Cynthia's vision became so poor even with glasses, simple day to day activities became nearly impossible.

Cynthia Ramirez: "The worst case scenario that I was told by the doctor is that I would need a corneal transplant."

Now there's new hope for Cynthia. The FDA just approved the corneal ring to treat her condition.

Today, San Francisco ophthalmologist Dr. Ella Factorovich is implanting the intacs corneal rings into her eye. The rings are two semi-circular slivers of plastic that slide into small openings Dr. Factorovich creates on either side in her cornea.

Ella Factorovich, M.D., San Francisco ophthalmologist: "What the intacs do is they stretch the cornea so that the cornea becomes more spherical overall, and any pointy abnormalities can be diminished."

As you can see from the diagram the rings reshape the center of the cornea.

Dr. Ella Factorovich: "All of a sudden it's as if you are standing in a tent and you stick your hands out and the top of the tent comes down."

Several weeks later Cynthia is still healing but says the operation worked.

Cynthia Ramirez: "I am seeing much better. I am able to read without having to have the book closer to my face."

Her life has changed because of a couple of slivers of plastic.

It takes three to four months for the cornea to completely heal.

Sidebar:

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