



Hampton runner sees clearer path to Olympic trials via new laser surgery

Frustrated with glasses getting in the way of her training, a Pitt grad student opts for a newer corrective procedure



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When Elsa Allison Mitchell was in third grade, she thought wearing glasses was the epitome of coolness.

“I thought it was a very adult thing, to have glasses, and I told my parents that I couldn't see and that I needed glasses,” she remembered, laughing.

Her parents were a bit skeptical: “They thought that I just wanted them for fashion.”

Call it karma or chance, but Mitchell failed that eye test and began her long relationship with spectacles.

An avid runner and ambassador for Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre's dance and fitness program, she eventually found that what once felt grown-up became a daily frustration.

In high school, her glasses really started interfering with her day-to-day routine. A competitive rower at Hampton High School, she trained six days a week on the Allegheny River.

"It was annoying to have glasses, and especially on the water," she said. Not only would the lenses get splashed, but the light reflecting off them was sometimes blinding. The frames slip-sliding down her nose once she worked up a sweat was also a bother.

Contacts weren't much better. Seasonal allergies caused hives on the inside of her eyelids, sometimes making the lenses pop out. "I remember sitting in physics class in high school and blinking, and my contact just fell out."

Mitchell, now 24 and a University of Pittsburgh graduate student in electrical engineering, said she finally decided to think about laser corrective surgery about a year ago.

Her prescription had been stable for two years, and she felt it was time for a permanent fix and scheduled a consultation with Deepinder Dhaliwal at the UPMC Vision Institute.

But her evaluation revealed complications. She had a cornea that was on the thinner side and, during additional testing, doctors discovered a large internal cyst.

Dhaliwal broke the news about the cyst, which only about 5% of people have. "That was frustrating," Mitchell remembered.

The cyst ruled out one option — the EVO implantable contact lens, which is placed inside the eye. And her thinner cornea made traditional LASIK less than ideal.

Then a new possibility emerged.

LASIK has long been the best-known form of laser vision correction, but a newer option called SMILE — or small incision lenticule extraction — is beginning to gain ground and was the best path forward for Mitchell.

SMILE corrects vision through a tiny incision rather than the flap used in traditional LASIK. The technique may benefit some patients with thinner corneas or highly active lifestyles, and it is now available in Western Pennsylvania for the first time at UPMC Vision Institute.

In late 2024, the institute, located in the city's Bluff neighborhood, first began offering the procedure, which was [approved by the FDA](#) in 2016.

Unlike LASIK, which requires creating and lifting a flap in the cornea before reshaping it with a second laser, SMILE uses a single, rapid femtosecond laser — which uses precise ultra-short pulses — to create a tiny incision. From there, a small disc of tissue is then removed, explained Dhaliwal, a professor of ophthalmology at the University of Pittsburgh and director of refractive surgery and the cornea service at the Vision Institute.

“The exciting thing about SMILE is that there's no flap,” Dhaliwal said. The surgery, which lasts just moments, “creates just a tiny little incision, a 4-millimeter incision, and it creates a lenticule in the cornea, which then we just go in and remove.”

Lenticules are disc-shaped pieces — similar in shape to lentils or M&Ms — carved into corneas by the laser. By removing this piece of tissue, the cornea changes shape and vision is corrected, [per the Cleveland Clinic](#).

UPMC, per Dhaliwal, is the only center in Western Pennsylvania offering SMILE and the only center in Pennsylvania with the VisuMax 800 laser, known as SMILE Pro, which reduces laser treatment time to under 10 seconds.

The smaller incision offers advantages, particularly for active patients like Mitchell.

Calling it a game changer for recovery, SMILE patients “can really jump into your activities, 24 to 48 hours later,” Dhaliwal said. LASIK patients, by contrast, need to be extremely careful for several days not to engage in any activity that might result in getting debris in or rubbing their eyes.

That mattered to Mitchell, who runs before work and is building toward a long-term goal of qualifying for the 2028 U.S. Olympic trials.

“I was allowed to return to running immediately, the day after my procedure,” she said. She chose to wait a week, out of caution, but said her

running experience has been transformed since the surgery. No more foggy lenses, slipping frames or a need for pricey contact lenses.

Mitchell said she did her own deep dive into the medical literature before committing.

“That was the first thing that I did was like, basically go to PubMed and read everything that I could about SMILE.”

Since its launch in 2011, Zeiss, the company that developed SMILE and its lasers, [reported that the procedure](#) has been used to treat more than 10 million eyes by over 3,000 surgeons from more than 80 countries.

On surgery day, Mitchell felt the kind of nerves she experiences before a race.

“The anticipatory anxiety for anything, I think, is always worse,” she said.

But the procedure itself was quick and painless.

“I was never in any pain,” she said. “When they finished, everything was a little fuzzy.” But she could read the embroidery on Dhaliwal’s lab coat, and the two women celebrated the moment.

By the next morning, Mitchell had 20/15 vision in one eye and 20/40 in the other. Within a week, both eyes were 20/20.

“It took me, probably, about three weeks to get used to waking up and not grabbing my glasses,” she said.

Dhaliwal emphasizes that refractive surgery varies from person to person and should not be treated as a commodity.

Laser eye surgery “is not something where you should shop for the lowest price,” she said. “This is surgery, right? This is a practice of medicine. This is a big deal, and we take it very seriously.”

She said UPMC’s refractive surgery center evaluates each patient individually, offering multiple options depending on corneal thickness, eye structure and lifestyle.

“The refractive surgery should never be one size fits all. You should go to a place where there's a breadth of options, so that you can really find what's

going to be the best for you,” Dhaliwal said.

For Mitchell, that personalized approach meant finding a solution that matched her physiology and her ambitions.

She began running seriously in 2023, placing fifth overall among women in the 5K component of Pittsburgh Marathon weekend that year — her first-ever 5K — and later qualifying for nationals with Pitt’s club team. Now she is building mileage with hopes of racing a fall marathon as a step toward Olympic Trials qualification.

After years of juggling glasses and contacts, she wakes up and simply sees — no straps, no solutions, no fogging lenses on humid mornings along the river.

“And now it just feels so normal, and it is. It's so worth it. I'm so happy.”

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