Many older people spend the later years of their lives struggling to see through a cloudy cornea, often to the point of blindness. Fortunately, a cutting-edge cornea transplant is now available in the Chippewa Valley to help these people “see” again.

“Endothelial transplantation” is a new, small-incision technique that replaces only the defective inner layers of the cornea, while leaving the outer layers undisturbed.

The cornea is the clear front of the eye that acts to focus light and maintain clarity so that vision is possible. The cornea has a critical inner component, a layer of pump cells (endothelium), which is responsible for keeping the cornea clear. When a person has a defective pump layer, the cornea swells, becomes cloudy and vision declines. Dysfunction of this layer can occur after cataract surgery or with the genetic condition, Fuchs’ Endothelial Dystrophy.

Until recently, the only solution for corneal swelling was a cookie-cutter type of cornea transplant. In this traditional surgical procedure, the patient’s entire central cornea is removed. Next, a full-thickness piece is cut from a donated cornea with an instrument resembling a cookie-cutter, and the tissue is sewn onto the eye. Higher risks of infection, astigmatism, and rupture have been significant downsides to this traditional cornea transplantation method.

Fortunately, a better option is now available for many people suffering from longtime swelling of the cornea. “Endothelial transplantation” is a new, small-incision technique that replaces only the defective inner layers of the cornea, while leaving the outer layers undisturbed. The donated tissue self-adheres by pump action, virtually eliminating the need for stitches. Recovery is shorter than traditional cornea transplants, and there is considerably less risk of infection, inflammation, astigmatism and structural instability.

The region’s first endothelial transplants were recently performed at the OakLeaf Surgical Hospital in Eau Claire by Dr. Thomas Harvey. While not everyone is a candidate for the new technique, most people with swollen corneas would benefit. A thorough examination by an experienced eye professional is recommended before proceeding with any eye surgery.

For those interested in learning more about endothelial transplantation or other eye topics, appointments to see Dr. Harvey can be scheduled by calling 715-834-8471. Dr. Harvey sees patients in Eau Claire, Menomonie and Neillsville. For additional information visit: www.thomasharveymd.com or www.chippewavalleyeyeclinic.com.