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Helen Keller Eye Research Foundation Embarks on Clinical Trial of Laser-Based Prevention for Retinal Detachment

Birmingham-based nonprofit co-designed trial collaborating with Wisconsin-based Five Lakes Clinical Research Consulting LLC.

Study organizers expect 500 patients with Stickler syndrome as participants in 10-year, landmark research initiative

Birmingham, Ala. – Sept. 2, 2025. In a move that may eventually prevent blindness for thousands, the Helen Keller Eye Research Foundation today announced the first clinical trial of a promising laser-based prevention for retinal detachment. Laser "welding" of the retina to the eye wall prevents retinal tears that cause retinal detachment.

The trial will involve up to 500 patients with Stickler syndrome, a genetic disorder impacting an estimated one in 7,500 Americans who are at especially high risk of retinal detachment. Since retinal detachments in aging adults also begin with such tears, success in the Stickler trial may eventually lead to their prevention.

Because of difficulties identifying potential study participants at high risk for retinal detachment, such clinical trials have eluded researchers for decades, making it impossible to document a preventive effect to a degree of statistical certainty now expected for broad acceptance as modern medical treatments.

However, Foundation researchers recognized that genetic testing can now precisely identify the highest risk group of all: children and adults with the rare inherited Stickler syndrome, which leaves these individuals with a lifetime retinal detachment risk of up to 65%, usually occurring in both eyes.

The Foundation collaborated with Five Lakes Clinical Research Consulting LLC (Five Lakes), a Wisconsin-based contract research organization (CRO), to design the trial.

"We jointly developed a scientifically rigorous and operationally feasible study protocol," said Chris Roginski, co-owner of Five Lakes. "We are deeply committed to advancing research that seeks to prevent blindness in individuals with Stickler syndrome and beyond."

Treatments such as the Foundation's laser preventive technique, called "Ora Secunda Cerclage/ Stickler Syndrome" (OSC/SS), have thus far reduced the rate of retinal detachment at least five-fold in Stickler syndrome patients, and almost eliminated the likelihood of both eyes detaching, according to Dr. Robert Morris, President of the Helen Keller Eye Research Foundation. The trial is based on the OSC/SS procedure published in January 2021 in the journal ***Clinical Ophthalmology*** [ARTICLE LINK].

"The OSC/SS clinical trial is the final element of proof needed for full adoption of this non-invasive laser treatment. Such clinical trials are the key path forward for evidence-based medicine," said Dr. Morris. "We believe that a smaller version of the treatment may prevent retinal detachments in high-risk eyes of elderly adults, especially in those adults who have suffered retinal detachment in one eye and are eager to prevent detachment in their second eye."

The Helen Keller Eye Research Foundation has recruited Dr. Peter Belin of Retina Consultants of Minnesota to help fine tune the study, to recruit trial sites, and to lead clinical trial operations over its planned 10-year term. “I’m honored to be chosen to lead the first clinical trial of laser prevention for retinal detachment as its Principal Investigator,” said Belin. “The OSC/SS trial plans to study up to 500 patients who will receive laser prevention from 2025 until 2030, with a final follow-up report to be issued in 2035.”

“Success in this trial would help answer Helen Keller’s plea to help me hasten the day when there shall be no preventable blindness,” said Morris.

VIDEO LINK

********** **END OF NEWS RELEASE**

BACKGROUNDER FOR JOURNALISTS

About the Retina and Retinal Detachment

The retina is the irreplaceable, light-sensing layer of the inner eye, receiving light and sending nerve impulses to the brain to create vision. Upon suddenly “floating off” the eye wall or “detaching,” it immediately ceases function and begins to deteriorate. This rapidly leads to blindness unless the eye is quickly and successfully repaired by surgery, making prevention especially critical. Retinal detachment is the leading cause of spontaneous sight loss in persons over age 60.

Tears in the peripheral retina (Figure 1) that otherwise lead to retinal detachment (Figure 2) are prevented by laser “welding” (Figure 3, VIDEO LINK).

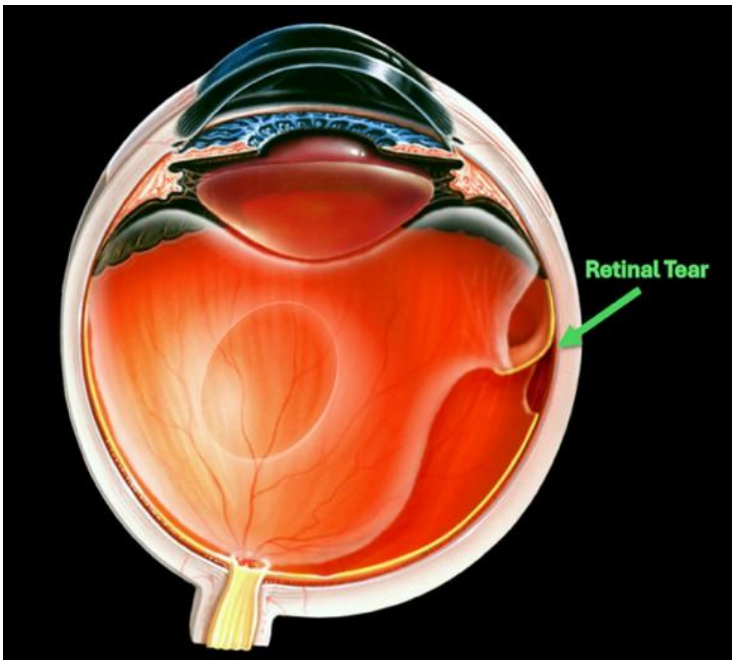


Figure 1. Artist s rendering of a retinal tear caused by (clear) vitreous gel pulling on the retina. Used with permission of Stephen Gordon.

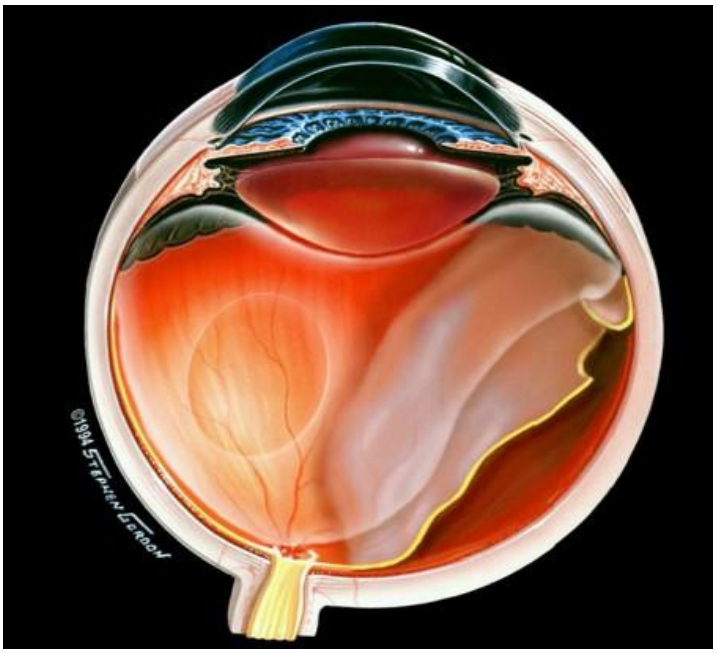


Figure 2. Aging vitreous gel has torn the peripheral retina, allowing aqueous fluid to enter the potential subretinal space, causing a blinding retinal detachment. Used with permission of Stephen Gordon.

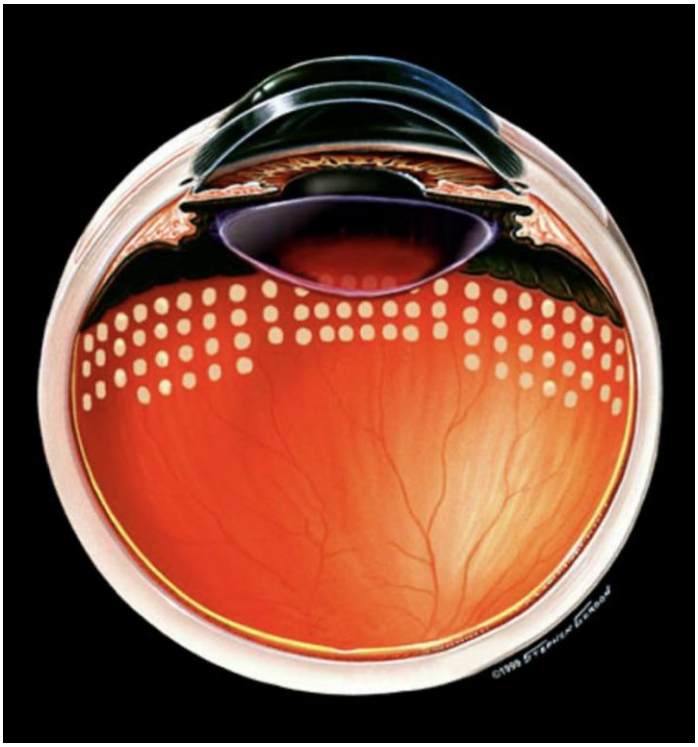


Figure 3. Ora Secunda Cerclage (OSC). An encircling grid of laser welds" is placed over the high-risk peripheral retina so as to prevent retinal tears. Used with permission of Stephen Gordon.

About Helen Keller

Helen Keller (1880–1968) suffered blindness and deafness from meningitis as an infant, in her hometown of Tuscumbia, Alabama. She was the first person to escape the “double dungeon” of blindness and deafness to effectively communicate with the seeing and hearing world. After a lifetime of accomplishments as an admired public figure, she was named by Time magazine as one of the 100 most important people of the 20th century. Her story continues to be taught in schools worldwide. For more information visit helenkellerfoundation.org.

About the Helen Keller Eye Research Foundation

The Helen Keller Eye Research Foundation (formerly the Helen Keller Foundation for Research and Education) was established to pursue cures for otherwise blinding disease through modern biomedical research. Based in Birmingham, Ala., the Foundation conducts clinical research primarily in the fields of retinal diseases and eye injury. Founded in1990 by the Helen Keller family and researchers affiliated with the University of Alabama at Birmingham, the Foundation has since developed breakthrough eye treatments for macular surgery, eye injury, eye infections, and retinal detachment prevention, working with volunteer research physicians worldwide.

The Foundation introduced a method of macular surgery in the 1990’s (ILM peeling) that still predominates today. An estimated 800,000 eye operations are now performed annually using this technique to restore optimal macular vision. The Foundation’s Director of Research, Ferenc Kuhn MD, PhD, was recently named the “Father of Modern Ocular Traumatology” by the American Society of Ocular Traumatology. For more information about the HKERF research program visit https://helenkellerfoundation.org/research-discoveries-power/

About Five Lakes Clinical Research Consulting LLC

Five Lakes Clinical Research Consulting, LLC is a Contract Research Organization (CRO) with a track record of guiding hundreds of clinical trials from inception to completion. Based in Wisconsin, the company specializes in managing the complex and detail-oriented aspects of clinical trial research, freeing up researchers and clinical teams to focus on their core tasks and goals. For more than a year they have worked seamlessly with the Helen Keller Eye Research Foundation, using online meetings, to design the OSC/SS trial. With the Helen Keller Eye Research Foundation as sponsor and collaborator, Five Lakes Clinical Research Consulting LLC will continue operational management of the OSC/SS trial for its entire term, supporting participating sites throughout the United States

For more information about the OSC/SS trial: WWW.CLINICALTRIALS.GOV **Or**
Contact: contactus@fivelakesconsultants.com

This news release is informational and is not intended for recruitment of OSC/SS study participants.