

QuickLook Focus In the NY Times

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James McCarthy, president of Freedom Vision, magnifies a label with the Quicklook Focus, a gadget intended to enlarge images for people with vision problems.

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Novelties

The Magnifying Glass Gets an Electronic Twist

By ANNE EISENBERG

PEOPLE who lose part of their sight to [macular degeneration](#), [diabetes](#) or other diseases may now benefit from some new technology. Several portable video devices that enlarge print may help them make the most of their remaining vision.

Swipe one of the devices over an airline ticket, or point it at a medicine bottle on a shelf, and all of the fine print is blown up and displayed in crisp letters on a screen.

Sturdy desktop video-based systems that magnify print have long been available, but lightweight, portable devices have become popular only in the past decade, as the size of consumer electronics products in general has shrunk. The new hand-held models typically weigh 9 ounces or less and can enlarge the print on closeby or more distant objects: users can pass the magnifier over a menu in a dimly lit restaurant, for example, or aim it at a grocery display on a store aisle.

The tiny, high-resolution video camera within the device captures the image, and the electronics bolster the contrast in the display, making it easier to read words on the monitor.

Dr. Bruce P. Rosenthal, chief of low-vision programs at Lighthouse International in Manhattan, which offers services for people with vision loss, said the portable magnifiers, with their built-in illumination and powerful electronics, have many advantages over traditional optical devices like magnifying glasses. “Optical devices can’t increase the contrast like these devices,” he said. “Loss in contrast causes as many problems as loss of visual acuity.”

Electronics in the new devices can make black print darker, or switch black lettering on white to white lettering on black — which some people with macular degeneration prefer.

Dr. Rosenthal said the devices could help people with low vision continue with their normal rounds — for instance, shopping in the supermarket or reading a prayer book at a religious service. “One of the concerns we have in working with the visually impaired is [depression](#),” he said. The more that people can complete everyday activities like everyone else, he added, “the more they can cope and feel that their lives are no different than others.”

The devices have a substantial drawback, however, when compared with a \$40 magnifying glass: They typically cost \$700 to \$1,300, and [Medicare](#) and most private insurance plans usually do not pay for them, said Robert McGillivray, low-vision specialist at the Carroll Center for the Blind in Newton, Mass.

“But if the devices get you back to work, or help you with your education, or increase your pleasure in reading,” he said, “it’s well worth considering them.”

The gadgets have a bigger area of view than a traditional magnifying glass and allow for far more flexibility in viewing an image, Mr. McGillivray said. And while the cost is typically not reimbursable, "if people are looking for a job, they may be eligible for vocational rehabilitation funds," he said.

"State agencies might provide them with this type of product if it helps them get or retain a job," he added.

One new portable device is the Quicklook Focus (\$995), which weights 8.8 ounces. It has a camera head that sends digital video to the display, where the image is magnified, said Fergal Brennan, a design engineer at Ash Technologies outside of Dublin, the manufacturer. Users can pass the camera over a document they want to read, or hold it up at arm's length to read the print on more distant objects.

The camera focuses electronically at the touch of a button and has a range of magnification starting at three times the original print size. The device runs off its own battery for four and a half hours at full power and for up to seven hours when the brightness is turned down, he said.

THE Quicklook Focus should be available by mid-June, said James McCarthy, president of Freedom Vision, the Mountain View, Calif.-based distributor for Ash in North America (www.freedomvision.net).

Video magnification devices are valuable products in a world of often-frivolous consumer electronics, said Dr. Rosenthal of Lighthouse International.

"One of the objectives of this new technology is to improve the quality of life for people with low vision," he said. "That's exactly what these products are starting to do."

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