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Glaucoma Surgery vs. Laser Treatment: What's the Difference?



If you've been diagnosed with glaucoma, you may have heard your doctor mention laser therapy or even surgery as part of your treatment plan. But what do these options actually involve — and how do you know which one is right for you?

At **Vance Thompson Vision in Billings, MT**, our glaucoma specialists are here to help you understand your treatment options in clear, simple terms. Whether you're trying to delay surgery or wondering if laser could replace your eye drops, this article will break down the key differences between glaucoma laser treatments and surgical procedures — so you can make a confident, informed decision.

Understanding the Goal: Lowering Eye Pressure

Both laser and surgical glaucoma treatments aim to do one thing: **lower intraocular pressure (IOP)**.

In glaucoma, elevated IOP damages the optic nerve. Lowering that pressure — either by reducing fluid production or improving drainage — is the only proven way to slow or stop vision loss.

How that pressure is lowered depends on your type of glaucoma, how far it has progressed, and how well your current treatments are working.

What Is Laser Treatment for Glaucoma?

Laser treatments are **minimally invasive** procedures typically done in-office. They use highly focused light to improve how fluid drains from the eye or to create new outflow pathways. Laser therapy can reduce or even eliminate the need for daily eye drops in some cases.

The Most Common Laser Procedures:

1. Selective Laser Trabeculoplasty (SLT)

- **Used for:** Open-angle glaucoma
- **How it works:** Targets the eye's natural drainage system to improve fluid outflow
- **Benefits:** Safe, repeatable, and often eliminates or reduces the need for drops
- **Time:** About 10–15 minutes
- **Recovery:** Very little downtime

2. Laser Peripheral Iridotomy (LPI)

- **Used for:** Angle-closure or narrow-angle glaucoma
- **How it works:** Creates a tiny hole in the iris to relieve pressure buildup
- **Benefits:** Prevents acute pressure spikes
- **Time:** Around 5 minutes per eye
- **Recovery:** Same day; may cause mild discomfort

Laser treatment is often the first step if medications aren't working or are causing side effects.

What Is Surgical Treatment for Glaucoma?

Surgery is usually reserved for patients who:

- Have **advanced glaucoma**
- Have **uncontrolled pressure** despite medication and/or laser
- Need more **aggressive IOP reduction**

Surgical procedures involve creating a new drainage pathway or implanting a device to help fluid leave the eye more efficiently.

Types of Glaucoma Surgery:

1. Minimally Invasive Glaucoma Surgery (MIGS)

- **Used for:** Mild to moderate glaucoma
- **How it works:** Inserts tiny stents (like iStent or Hydrus) or devices during cataract surgery to improve drainage
- **Benefits:** Less risk, shorter recovery
- **Often combined with:** Cataract surgery
- **Recovery:** Rapid (usually a few days)

2. Trabeculectomy

- **Used for:** Moderate to advanced glaucoma
- **How it works:** Creates a new drainage channel under the eyelid
- **Benefits:** Very effective at lowering pressure
- **Risks:** Higher chance of infection or complications
- **Recovery:** Several weeks with frequent follow-ups

3. Tube Shunt Surgery (e.g., Ahmed, Baerveldt)

- **Used for:** Complex or failed previous glaucoma surgeries

- **How it works:** Implants a tiny tube to redirect fluid to a reservoir under the conjunctiva
- **Benefits:** Long-term control for difficult cases
- **Recovery:** More intensive post-op care

Key Differences at a Glance

Feature	Laser Treatment	Glaucoma Surgery
Invasiveness	Minimally invasive (non-surgical)	Surgical (may require incisions)
Setting	In-office	Operating room
Recovery time	Hours to 1 day	Days to weeks
Used for	Early to moderate glaucoma	Moderate to advanced glaucoma
Repeatable?	Yes (especially SLT)	MIGS sometimes; traditional usually not
Risk level	Low	Moderate to high
Effectiveness	Moderate (good for early disease)	High (needed for advanced cases)

Which Option Is Right for You?

Choosing between laser and surgery depends on several key factors:

1. How Advanced Is Your Glaucoma?

- **Early stage:** Laser or medication usually preferred
- **Moderate to advanced:** MIGS or traditional surgery may be needed

2. How Well Are Your Eye Drops Working?

If you're not reaching target pressure — or struggling with side effects — your doctor may recommend laser or surgery.

3. Do You Have Cataracts Too?

MIGS procedures can be combined with cataract surgery for a double benefit. This is a great option for patients 60+ with both conditions.

4. How Aggressive Should We Be?

Your vision, lifestyle, pressure goals, and preferences all matter. At **Vance Thompson Vision**, we work closely with you to create a plan that fits your life — not just your eye chart.

What to Expect from Each Procedure at Vance Thompson Vision

We'll walk with you through every step:

Before:

- Comprehensive glaucoma evaluation
- Advanced imaging
- Detailed discussion of options and risks

During:

- In-office laser or outpatient surgery
- Gentle anesthesia (topical or local)
- Procedures typically under 60 minutes

After:

- Customized follow-up plan
- Pressure monitoring
- Medication adjustments as needed

We make sure you always know what's happening — and what to expect next.

Why Choose Vance Thompson Vision for Glaucoma in Billings, MT?

- Fellowship-trained glaucoma specialists

- Full range of treatment options under one roof
- Advanced imaging and diagnostic technology
- Personalized care plans tailored to your lifestyle
- Local convenience with nationally respected expertise

We're proud to offer laser therapy, MIGS, and advanced glaucoma surgery right here in Billings — with the compassion and clarity every patient deserves.

Call to Action: Find the Right Glaucoma Treatment for You

Don't let glaucoma progress while you weigh your options. Let us help you choose the best path forward for your vision and lifestyle.

Company Description

Vance Thompson Vision Billings takes pride in being world leaders in quality vision correction and setting global standards for excellent patient care in ophthalmology. We specialize in many forms of vision surgery and treatment with a specific focus on LASIK, refractive cataract surgery, glaucoma, cornea care, and oculoplastics.

Contact Details

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Google Site: <https://sites.google.com/view/vancethompsonvision/location/glaucoma-billings/>

Google Folder: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1N-2XfeP_cxcJZl3qkz3H7QtPlfShe8uV?usp=drive_open

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<https://mgyb.co/s/MoNsT>

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