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CONTACT LENSES AND ADULTS

Are you, as I call it, a “non teen ager?” Thinking about contact lenses? Some of us, as we get past the child rearing times of our lives, begin to think of adventures we hadn't in earlier years. For some, that can produce a desire to wear contact lenses. There are numbers of reasons for their appeal—freedom from eyeglass frames, not having to deal with reflections, rain spattered lenses, and the like. And the cosmetic appeal is considerable as we enter a non-eyeglass arena.

What are the challenges to contact lens use for an adult? I think the challenges involve optics and physiology.

OPTICAL CHALLENGES

Most contact lenses are “single vision”, meaning that they deliver only one prescription. For youth and young adults that's just fine because their eyes demand only a single prescription correction—for distant, and their eyes then adjust to allow reading focus.

But for those of us above the age of 40 or so, our eyes need outside help for reading, since the adjustor (accommodative) system doesn't do full job of switching our focus from far to near. With glasses, that is relatively easily fixed by segmented bifocals or by lineless progressive glasses. Sometimes a person has a set of glasses for distant, and another pair for reading or computer.

With contact lenses, different methods must be used to achieve the switch over from distant to near. That's because soft contacts don't have true bifocal designs with a distant and near zone to switch between.

So, to get contacts to provide distant and near vision, one of three methods must be used:

One, contact lenses for distant in both eyes and wear reading glasses over them for closeup. Gives good sharpness distant and near but not a complete break from glasses.

A second option is monovision. In this, each eye receives a single vision contact lens, but one eye is focused for distant and the other for near. That sounds like a real problem to wear, but success is relatively common. Your visual system must adjust to the challenge of paying attention to one eye for far away things and the other for near things.

The last option is a multifocal contact lens. In soft lenses, the eye simultaneously receives images for distant and near. These simultaneous images are sent to the brain, and the brain must learn to gain the information it sees by interpreting the image it gets. Your brain learns, hopefully, to separate the “wheat from the chaff”—paying attention to the distant image when looking at distant and attention to the near image when viewing items up close. The two images can compete with each other, and so the visual quality can be compromised.

Someone who is very demanding on their visual sharpness may not find monovision or multifocal lenses satisfactory, However, in a person with average visual needs and high motivation to get rid of glasses they definitely have their possibilities.

PHYSIOLOGY

As we age, our eyes become dryer. That can produce trouble wearing contacts—contact lenses require a good quantity of tears to stay supple and comfortable.

A last thought—when we are teenagers we are very motivated to do all we can to enhance our appearance. So, the challenges of adapting to contact lenses are put on the back burner as we enjoy the appearance upgrade. But, for many of us adults, the cosmetic improvement might not be enough motivation to power us through the adaptation phase, or the learning phase as we get adjusted to placing and removing contact lenses.