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CONTACT LENSES AND YOUNG PEOPLE

As far as vision is concerned, there are probably few things as enticing as the contact lens. Freedom from glasses, social confidence and good looks are big incentives.

The main method of correction now is the soft disposable contact lens. Available for most prescriptions, these small (half inch across) disks of flexible plastic are almost miracles in their ability to sidestep the need for even high eyeglass corrections. By the way, "disposable" means that the contact is not intended for use more than two weeks to a month—after that, the lens becomes filmy or deposit-laden from its exposure to the tear film and needs disposal. The wearer receives his or her contact lenses in multipacks, each pack containing between six and twenty-four lenses. On schedule, the contacts are replaced.

Contact lenses offer young people a lot of self confidence as their glasses are shed. Social interactions are easier; some youth really can "emerge" from their shells and gain self-esteem and confidence.

Visual advantages include better peripheral vision; no trouble with steaming of glasses; and sports are helped since there are no glasses to get bumped around or jostled.

ARE THERE DISADVANTAGES TO CONTACTS?

Yes, for one thing they must be handled, cleaned, inserted—just in general cared for. It takes personal responsibility and planning to do this. Those of school age must be able to allocate time to get the contacts in. Someone with a strong aversion to manipulation around the eyes will have a difficult time with contact lenses.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

Medically, contact lenses are very safe. But, there are possible medical effects, and those effects need to be discussed.

Sometimes, contact lens complications are simple, like redness of the eye. This can result from excessive wear time, lenses being too old and deposit-laden, and the like. Sometimes, people are sensitive to contact lens solutions and have to buy hypoallergenic products. Some people develop sensitivities to the mechanical proximity of a contact lens or its surface deposits. The sensitivities can show up as redness or blister like formations under the upper eye lid. This condition is called giant papillary conjunctivitis (abbreviated GPC) and is usually treated by improving contact lens cleaning methods, changing solutions, or reducing the amount of wear time or duration between lens replacements. Occasionally, prescription eye drops can be used for these sorts of problems.

Sometimes, people can develop blood vessel growth into the cornea (clear window of the front of the eye). This condition is called corneal neovascularization and can result from a contact lens which is fitting too tightly to the eye, or is not transferring enough oxygen to the corneal surface.

Finally, rarely a patient can develop ulcerative keratitis, a difficult and sight threatening condition in which the corneal surface has developed a small wound in its surface. When that occurs, bacteria can invade the cornea through the break and cause plenty of trouble.

Most of the time if this should occur, strong antibiotic drops are prescribed. Usually, these drops address the problem. However, the site of the infection can develop a scar which can permanently reduce the sharpness of the eye vision. Luckily the corneal ulcer is a rare condition, and more likely to occur when the person wears their contact lenses while sleeping. Even though these conditions can sound scary the reality is that in the great majority of cases no problem occurs. But I do want patients (and their parents) to understand possible ramifications up front.

AT WHAT AGE SHOULD MY CHILD GET CONTACTS?

I get asked about the proper age to start contact lenses. Medically speaking, contact lenses can be fit to very young people, even babies in exceptional cases. But, since contact lenses need handling and care, for our purposes we need to consider a child's maturity level and ability to take care of things. As a rule, age 12 or 13 in a responsible youth is a reasonable age to start contacts.

Another commonly asked question is, "Will wearing contact lenses prevent my child's eyes from getting worse?" The answer is no—if your child's eyes are destined to worsen that will happen regardless of whether or not contact lenses are used.

Used properly, contact lenses are a fantastic way of getting glasses-free sight, great sports vision, and a big improvement in self confidence.