

Taking care of contact lenses

With around 135 million people worldwide wearing contact lenses, it's certainly become a very popular way of correcting a variety of vision impairment problems.

Of course, contact lenses are not all the same; they differ not only with regard to the prescription needs of the wearer, but they can also be made of different materials – making them more or less suitable for every individual.

Contact lenses can be made of hard plastic or a soft gel-like material. The modern hard lenses are also known as rigid gas permeable (RGP) lenses.

RGP lenses generally provide sharper vision than soft lenses and are more suitable for a wider range of so-called refractive disorders. They are less likely than soft lenses to harbour bacteria, and they do not dehydrate.

However, RGP lenses have some disadvantages, too. Compared with soft lenses they are initially less comfortable to wear; they are not so easy to insert or take out; and because of their small size, they may slip off the centre of the eye causing discomfort and blurred vision.

Perhaps not surprising then, the easier-to-wear soft contact lenses account for around 90% of all contact lenses prescribed in Australia.

Soft contact lenses are larger and so they stay in place much more easily; they're easier to handle and less likely to allow foreign bodies to lodge beneath them. They can be tinted, too; so you can co-ordinate the colour of your eyes with your wardrobe.

Soft contact lenses are also available in a 'disposable' form to be replaced daily, fortnightly or monthly. Replacing lenses at short intervals can help avoid protein build-up; and the disposable lenses are convenient for occasional 'contacts' wearers such as people who play sport or wear them socially.

The disposable lenses that are discarded after one use don't require cleaning, but most hard and soft lenses must be cleaned and disinfected each time they are removed from the eye.

This procedure is important to minimise the risk of eye irritation, abrasion and infection. If such a problem is suspected, you should check with your doctor or optometrist. Improper use of contact lenses can not only damage the lenses but also damage the eye.

Dry eye is a major pre-disposing factor in many eye problems. And inappropriate use of contact lenses can definitely cause dry eye.

Ironically, the soft lenses which contain up to nearly 80% water are more likely to dehydrate the eye. As water evaporates from the outer surface of the lens, it is replaced by moisture absorbed through the inner surface from the natural tear film. Regular use of lubricating eye drops, specially designed for contact lens wearers, is recommended.

Be aware, however, that most eye drops are not suitable for use when contact lenses are being worn; and there are some medicines taken orally which may interfere with the wearing of contact lenses – perhaps causing dry eye, dehydration or discoloration of the lenses or inflammation around the eye.

For more advice pick up a copy of the *Contact Lens Care* fact card. It is available at all pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society's Self Care health information. Phone 1300 369 772 or check out the website:

www.psa.org.au