



From the editors of  ALL ABOUT VISION .com

Teens and Contact Lenses: What Parents Need to Know

CONTACT LENS Q&A

How old do you have to be to wear contact lenses?

There is no age limit: babies can wear them, and so can seniors. Many eye care professionals begin to encourage contact lens wear at age 11 to 14.

The real issue for teens is not age, but whether they are responsible enough to wear and care for contact lenses properly. Parents, teens, and their eye care practitioner must make this decision together.

Why not just wear eyeglasses?

Teens are self-conscious, and they often feel more attractive and accepted if they don't have a pair of eyeglasses in front of their eyes. Contact lenses may help teens feel greater self-esteem and more at ease around others. They're also an advantage for active teens who play sports.

How much care do contact lenses require?

Cleaning regimens are easier than ever. Most people use just one bottle of multi-purpose solution and a case. Of course, one type of contact lens — daily disposable — doesn't need a cleaning regimen, because the lenses are tossed in the trash at the end of each day. For this reason, daily disposable contacts are a great vision correction option for most teens.



Wearing contact lenses can help teenagers feel more self-confident about their appearance.

For contacts that do require care, many eye care practitioners report that teens and children are more diligent about cleaning their contact lenses than are adults, who after years of wearing them often become more casual about lens care. And young people are more careful about following directions given them by a medical professional.

Do you need a prescription to get contacts?

Yes. The Food and Drug Administration classifies contact lenses as a medical device. Contacts must fit properly on the eye — if they don't, serious eye health issues can result. That's why they must be fitted by an eye care practitioner, who will write a prescription for the proper size, shape, power, and brand of lenses.

By law, you need a prescription in order to purchase contact lenses. This is true even if your contacts have no vision correction in them, such as some color contacts or special-effect contacts.

A contact lens fitting is painless and takes very little time. It can be done in conjunction with a regular eye exam.

Are contact lenses more or less expensive than glasses?

It's impossible to generalize about cost. As with eyeglasses, the cost of contact lenses varies widely, depending on the brand, the prescription, and how often the lenses are replaced. You can always call your eye care practitioner and ask for a price range. You should also take into account the cost of cleaning supplies and cases, plus the fact that a backup pair of eyeglasses is recommended.

Daily disposable contacts are a special case, because they don't require any cleaning supplies or containers. It depends on the brand and the supplier, but daily disposables can cost about \$1 per day, making them affordable for most people.

What if a lens gets lost or torn?

Make sure you discuss with your eye doctor what you can do to replace a contact lens that has been torn, damaged or lost. If you wear disposable contacts, you don't have the expense or inconvenience of worrying about a replacement because you'll already have a supply of lenses on hand.

Are contacts comfortable?



With daily disposable contacts, parents can be sure that their teens have clean lenses on their eyes every morning.

Modern contact lenses are designed to be very comfortable. Most are made of a soft material that is hardly noticeable, if at all, once the lenses are placed on the eyes. Eye care practitioners have very sophisticated tools for measuring the eyes and making sure the lenses fit well.

Contacts can become uncomfortable over time if they accumulate dirt or allergens

that stick to the them. Proper care and cleaning normally prevents this. Of course, this is not a concern with daily disposables because any accumulated allergens or other lens deposits are discarded with the lens each night.

Is it difficult to put contact lenses on?

Some people wonder if it will hurt to apply contact lenses to their eyes for the first time. The fear is understandable, and it's related to the reluctance they may have to touch their eyes. But after learning how to insert and remove their lenses, most people find it completely painless, and quite easy to do.

Are contact lenses safe?

For teens, contact lenses may be safer than eyeglasses in many situations. Unlike glasses, they are unlikely to be damaged during football, basketball, and other rough sports. Plus, if a sport requires safety goggles or a ski mask, it is more convenient and comfortable to wear them over contact lenses than over eyeglasses.

Otherwise, contact lenses are very safe if cared for properly. Your teen shouldn't swap lenses with friends or wear them longer than prescribed, and regular eye exams are important. Remember: if at any time your eyes don't look good, feel good or see well — see your doctor.

Can a contact lens get stuck behind the eye?

A natural membrane barrier exists between the front and the back of the eye. That could never, ever happen.

What about color and special effect contact lenses?



Color contact lenses now offer natural-looking eye color change. They come in daily disposable form, too!

These lenses are fun and safe as long as they are properly fitted and prescribed by an eye care practitioner. Never buy them at a beauty parlor, swap meet, or at any store or online without a prescription. Any retailer who tries to sell you lenses in that way is operating outside of the law and doesn't care about the safety of your eyes.

Remember that if cosmetic contacts are worn only occasionally, they need to be properly stored and disinfected between wearing.

Is it OK try on a friend's contact lenses?

No, not even if the lenses have no vision correction in them. Dangerous microorganisms that cause serious eye infections can be passed along that way. Most doctors will provide a free trial pair so your teen can see how lenses feel or look.

Is it okay to sleep in contacts?

Not all contact lenses are designed for overnight wear. Further, not everyone's eyes can adapt to this, even when using the proper lenses. Only an eye care practitioner can judge whether someone is a candidate to sleep in contacts, and no one should sleep with their lenses in unless their eye care practitioner says it's okay.

In addition, overnight wear also creates a small degree of increased health risk. The healthiest way to wear contacts is to remove and discard them each night.

What are the different types of contact lenses?

Contact lenses can be grouped together based on several characteristics:

- Lens material — either soft or gas permeable (also called RGPs)
- Wear schedule — that is, whether you take them out to sleep. Lenses can be FDA approved for either daily wear or extended (overnight) wear.

- Replacement schedule, or how often you dispose of them and begin wearing a fresh pair. Disposable lenses are most popular and depending on the brand, they are replaced daily, monthly, or every one or two weeks.

In addition to the above, lenses come in colors and in designs for people who need bifocals, or have astigmatism.



Caught napping? No-care daily disposable contacts can be discarded before sleep, with a clean, new pair inserted after waking.

How do I decide on the right lenses?

Your doctor can help you decide which combination of features is right for your teen. In addition to your teen's preferences, the doctor will evaluate his or her eye structure, tears, and visual acuity to determine what lenses will be healthy and comfortable.

If you have astigmatism or a strong prescription, don't you have to wear glasses instead?

Not any more! That may have been true years ago, but now contact lenses are manufactured in designs that work for nearly everyone, including people with astigmatism.

Is LASIK a better option for teens than contact lenses?

LASIK is not an option for teenagers. The Food and Drug Administration has set the minimum age for laser vision correction at 18 (or 21 for some procedures). One big reason is that teens' eyes may still be changing from one year to the next. For example, during high school and college years, nearsightedness may worsen a bit each year, until the eyes "settle" into a somewhat final prescription around the mid-20s. When the eyes are changing so rapidly, it doesn't make sense to perform LASIK on them, because the effect of the surgery will not last.

What if contact lenses just don't work out?

Sometimes parents let their teen wear them for a trial period, so they can prove they are ready for the responsibility. If it doesn't work out, the teen can always go back to wearing glasses and re-try contact lenses later on.

Part-time wear is also an option, and daily disposables are especially good for this.

Be ready to spend an hour or more at the eye care practitioner's office.

A contact lens fitting is usually performed as part of a complete eye exam. So there will likely be a series of tests for all kinds of things, such as depth perception, near and distance vision, and glaucoma.

Bring sunglasses.

The eye care practitioner may put in drops to dilate the pupils; this is so he can see the inner structures of the eye to check for diseases or other problems. After dilation, the eyes may be sensitive to light for a few hours.

Bring a list of questions and ask all of them.

This is your chance to take advantage of your eye care practitioner's expertise! He or she will be happy to answer all your questions, so don't hold back, even if you think some of your questions may be trivial.

Understand that eyeglasses may be the best option for the time being.

Once in a while an eye care practitioner may feel that a teen isn't ready for contact lenses. Or contacts may not be right for someone's particular prescription or lifestyle. Even if contact lenses are not the best option for now, they may be in a year or so.

Use the following page to document the understanding between you and your teen about the wear and care of contact lenses.

The Contact Lens Pledge

I understand that wearing contact lenses at my age means I must engage in safe and responsible behavior that includes:

- Wearing and caring for my contact lenses exactly as my eye care practitioner instructs me.
- Telling my parents immediately if my eyes don't look good or feel good, or if my vision isn't good.
- Handling my contact lenses carefully so I don't lose or tear them.
- Never letting anyone else wear my contacts — not even my best friend.

Here you can add any other promises that you and your parents would like to include:

- _____
- _____
- _____

My parents and I have now thoroughly discussed these points. I understand that if I don't keep these promises, my parents have the right to discontinue my contact lens wear until they feel that I am ready for them again.

Signed,

_____ (teen)

_____ (parent)

_____ (date)