Medical Xpress

Contact lenses purchased over Internet may place individuals at risk for harmful eyecare practices

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Purchasing contact lenses online may save consumers time, but the process could cause more problems in the long run, according to a new study reported in the January issue of Optometry: Journal of the American Optometric Association. The research, conducted by Joshua Fogel, Ph.D., and Chaya Zidile of Brooklyn College, found that individuals who did not purchase their contact lenses from an eye doctor, but from an online site or store, are potentially placing themselves at greater risk.

The findings indicated that online and store purchasers (consumers who get their contacts at a wholesale club or optical chain outlet) are less likely to adhere to healthy eye care practices, as recommended by their eye doctor.

According to the Contact Lens Institute (CLI), more than 30 million individuals wear contact lenses. With the Fairness to Contact Lens Consumers Act taking effect in 2004, mandating that the prescribing eye doctor provide a copy of the contact lens prescription at no charge to the patient, consumers have the option to purchase their lenses (with a valid prescription) elsewhere. With the Internet becoming a more recognized source for health and medical information, consumers are increasingly purchasing their contact lenses online.

“We found that a pattern exists regarding the method of contact lens

purchasing and following recommendations from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA)," said Dr. Fogel. "Those who bought contact lenses at their doctor's office followed a number of FDA recommendations more so than those who bought contact lenses elsewhere."

The study, which researched the purchasing and eye care behaviors of contact lens wearers, found that 86 percent of individuals who purchased their lenses from an eye doctor received a yearly comprehensive eye exam. But, only 76.5 percent of those individuals who purchased their lenses via the Internet saw an eye doctor on a routine basis.

"Frequent optometric examinations are a vital part of a contact lens wearer's preventive health care routine," said Louise Sclafani, O.D., chair of the AOA's Contact Lens and Cornea Section. "Having one's eye health and vision examined on a regular, timely basis is important to maintaining overall health and can even lead to early detection of various diseases."

During a comprehensive eye exam, one of the most important tests a doctor of optometry administers is a contact lens prescription assessment. An adult's eyesight can change rapidly and frequently; wearing contact lenses with an incorrect prescription can result in eye discomfort, fatigue, blurred vision and headaches.

Despite these uncomfortable side effects, 35 percent of online purchasers did not check that the prescription was correct.

One of the largest discrepancies found between in-office and out-of-office contact lens purchases was seen in the number of individuals who saw an eye doctor for a follow-up appointment to ensure the proper fit of their lenses. Fifty-seven percent of individuals who purchased their lenses from an eye doctor went in for a follow-up appointment; as

compared to only 29 percent of online purchasers.

“Contact lenses are among the safest forms of vision correction when patients follow the proper care and wearing instructions from their eye doctor,” said Dr. Sclafani. “However, it’s important to remember that contact lenses and the solutions used with them are medical devices regulated by the FDA. Just as when using other medical devices, patients should stay in close contact with their optometrist to ensure they are receiving appropriate and up-to-date clinical guidance based on individual eye health needs.”

The research also indicated that the majority of consumers feel more confident purchasing their contact lenses from a familiar and reliable place such as their eye doctor or store rather than through the Internet. In fact, 89 percent and 91 percent of respondents respectively said they felt confident purchasing contact lenses from their familiar, reliable eye doctor or store. That number decreased to 77 percent when surveying individuals who made a purchase via the Internet.

“Although buying contacts online can be more cost-effective and convenient, we strongly urge patients to understand that there are risks involved to wearing contact lenses,” said Dr. Sclafani. “Because of this, it’s necessary that patients visit their eye doctor on a regular basis and communicate any recent visual changes and discomfort experienced as a result of contact lens wear.”

Source: American Optometric Association

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