

## Color contacts are popular for costumes but bad for the eyes

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On Halloween, Morgan Foy will transform into Elise, the Spider Queen from the online video game "League of Legends."

The Winter Park, Fla., woman's black-and-red costume resembles a seductive spider queen standing on two hind legs. The six other legs jut out sharply from the back of the costume.

And to make the costume even creepier: Foy, 21, will pop in contacts to make her eyes look red.

That can be dangerous, doctors caution.

Foy bought decorative red [contact lenses](#) with a few clicks online - but the contacts aren't supposed to be available for sale.

A 2005 federal law banned the sale of nonprescription contact lenses in the United States. It classified all contact lenses as medical devices, restricting their distribution to licensed eye-care professionals.

Such easy access concerns experts because the contacts - cat eyes and lizard eyes, for example - are not regulated and can damage the eye.

Every year around Halloween, the American Academy of Ophthalmology and state organizations such as the Florida Society of Ophthalmology ramp up their efforts to educate consumers about the dangers of nonprescription costume contacts. AAO's patient website,

geteyesmart.org, features a teenager who lost his eyesight after wearing \$20 color contacts he bought at a gas station.

Ophthalmologist Dr. Deepak Raja, a cornea specialist at Orlando Eye Institute, said this time of year he sees an increase in eye injuries, particularly to the cornea - the delicate, transparent layer that covers the front of the eye.

"Contact lenses aren't one size fits all," Raja said. "But people have very easy access to (decorative contact lenses), and the problem is that they can cause infection if they don't fit properly."

Simply put, the ill-fitting contacts can rub against the cornea, creating small abrasions, and bacteria can find their way into layers that are protected otherwise.

Foy is no stranger to decorative contacts. She dons elaborate cosplay costumes several times a year for conventions. For her last costume, she wore contacts that covered most of her eyes and made them look white.

"It was awesome, but my eyes were irritated by the end of the day," she said.

The decorative contacts sometimes aren't smoothly polished, and any small irregularity on their surface, even microscopic, can scratch the cornea. The lenses can also be contaminated; maybe they're in a contaminated solution or have been mishandled, said Dr. Jaime Membreno, past president of the Florida Society of Ophthalmology.

"I've seen patients with corneal scratches and infections just using prescription contacts," said Membreno of RetinaMacula Specialists. "The problem is compounded by costume contacts."

The damage to the eye can happen as soon as the decorative contacts are placed on the eyes or during a longer period of time. Depending on the severity of injury, treatment varies. Sometimes antibiotic eyedrops fix the problem; sometimes there's a need for surgery; and in extreme cases, patients might lose their eyesight or an eyeball, Membreno said.

AAO recommends that if you notice redness, excessive discharge, swelling, pain or discomfort, remove the contacts and seek medical attention. And keep your contacts. Your doctor can culture the contact and find out what organism is the cause of infection, Membreno said.

And for those who insist on wearing color contacts, there's a safer way to wear them: See an eye doctor and get prescription color lenses.

Foy hasn't experienced a serious injury from the decorative contacts, but a day after talking with the Sentinel, she wrote in an email: "I decided to go and do a little research and found that getting my lenses prescribed for me is much safer and will be more comfortable, so I'll be ordering them that way from now on!"

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