

MEDIA RELEASE

Halloween contact lenses are a horror story for your eyes

Wednesday, 16 October. Melbourne: In the lead up to Halloween, novelty non-prescription contact lenses, easily obtained online, are frightening Australian optometrists for all the wrong reasons.

Optometry Australia warned consumers not to buy any cosmetic contact lenses without consulting their optometrist.

The truly scary thing about these cosmetic contact lenses – made in zombie, werewolf and vampire varieties -- can be found under the microscope. In a recent US case report¹ published in the [Journal of Forensic Science](#) by Food & Drug Administration's (FDA's) Forensic Chemistry Center, costume contact lenses were shown to have high rates of microbial contamination which can lead to ocular infections, conjunctivitis and even permanent visual impairment and blindness.

The study found 60 per cent of suspected counterfeit lenses and 27 per cent of the authentic non-corrective contact lenses, obtained directly from manufacturers without a prescription, were contaminated. Only three per cent of authentic, prescribed contact lenses were contaminated.

Furthermore, the report found unapproved, counterfeit and decorative contact lenses tested positive for the kinds of microbial contamination frequently found in [hospital waste water](#) or [spoiled food](#).

Another [study](#) found that cosmetic contact lenses available online often circumvent regulation from safety agencies such as the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) and can contain harmful chemicals such as chlorine, which can seep from the colourants in the lens to cause toxicity problems for the eyes².

Optometry Australia's resident optometrist Luke Arundel explained, "Contact lenses aren't costumes. They are medical devices worn on living tissue. It is essential they be purchased from an optometrist who will measure each eye to properly fit the lenses and evaluate how the eye responds to contact lens wear using a microscope".

"These novelty items are often playfully packaged and targeted to teens who may have no experience using contact lenses. Not only do optometrists ensure contact lenses fit the wearer properly, they also instruct on appropriate insertion and removal techniques and correct contact lens care to minimise the risk of irreversible eye damage."

"It's scary to think how easily these dangerous lenses can be obtained online," he said.

"There are, however, many prescription cosmetic or decorative contact lenses available through optometrists that are safe when properly prescribed and monitored by an eye care professional," Mr Arundel said.

¹ Land AD, Penno KL, Brzezinski JL. Identification of Microorganisms Isolated From Counterfeit and Unapproved Decorative Contact Lenses. J Forensic Sci. 2017 May 24.

² Scanning Electron Microscopy Findings with Energy-Dispersive X-ray Investigations of Cosmetically Tinted Contact Lenses, Eye & Contact Lens, Sept. 2015

Dangers of buying contact lenses online

An Australian study has shown there is a heightened risk of microbial keratitis – a potentially sight-threatening infection of the cornea – with contact lenses purchased online.

As reported recently in [Australian Optometry](#), internet purchase of contact lenses was identified as a risk factor for contact lens-related microbial keratitis in an Australian study published in [Ophthalmology](#)³ in 2008.

It found that the risk of infection was 4.76 times higher for those consumers who bought their lenses from sources other than their optometrist, such as the internet or mail order, and they were less likely to comply with good eye-care practices.

Legal loopholes make regulation difficult

Mr Arundel said there was currently a dangerous legal 'loophole' which made it easy for people to buy cosmetic contact lenses (CCLs) without a prescription, but each state had its own regulations.

"While it's illegal in the United States to sell CCLs without a prescription, in Australia it differs from state to state.

"There is no specific piece of legislation in Queensland, Victoria, Western Australia and Tasmania that regulates the sale of non-prescription contact lenses. In New South Wales, only an optometrist or optical dispenser can supply CCLs but you don't need a prescription. In South Australia it's illegal to sell CCLs without a valid prescription. However, patients aren't aware of these laws and young people are a simple Google search away from purchasing them online.

"The Health Practitioner Regulation National Law Act 2009 states that you have to be an optometrist (or trained medical practitioner) to write out a prescription for a contact lens, but this leaves a massive legal loophole as there is nothing to stop anyone from actually selling cosmetic contact lenses.

"This is why Optometry Australia's warning in the lead up to Halloween is such an important one. It's so easy for young people to obtain novelty contact lenses online, but the risk of infection is real and the consequences can be devastating.

"This Halloween we don't want to hear of yet another report of a young person suffering vision impairment caused by novelty lenses," he said.

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Optometry Australia is the peak professional body for optometrists. Representing eight out of every 10 Australian-based optometrists, Optometry Australia's focus is to lead and advance the profession of optometry by putting eye-health front and centre of Australian health care.

³ The Incidence of Contact Lens-Related Microbial Keratitis in Australia. Stapleton, Fiona et al. *Ophthalmology*, Volume 115, Issue 10, 1655 - 1662