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ILLEGAL DECORATIVE CONTACT LENSES: A 'SCARY' CHOICE FOR HALLOWEEN

Over-the-counter decorative contact lenses can cause serious eye infections and possibly permanent vision loss

[DENVER, CO], Oct. 15, 2011 – Halloween is the one time of the year where consumers can transform themselves into ghosts, goblins, celebrities or superheroes. However, when choosing the perfect costume, it's important to keep health and safety in mind. The American Optometric Association (AOA) is warning consumers about the risks of wearing decorative, non-corrective contact lenses sold illegally, without a prescription from an eye doctor.

According to the AOA's 2011 American Eye-Q® survey, 11 percent of respondents indicate wearing decorative or colored contact lenses that don't provide vision correction. Of those who wear decorative lenses, 36 percent report illegally purchasing decorative contact lenses without a prescription and from a source other than an eye doctor, a concern to doctors of optometry.

Decorative contacts are a concern all year long, but Halloween is a time when people use them most as a way to enhance costumes. Consumers who purchase lenses without a prescription or without consultation from an eye doctor put themselves at risk of serious bacterial infection, or even significant damage to the eye's ability to function, with the potential for irreversible sight loss.

Since 2005, federal law requires the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to regulate decorative lenses as medical devices, similar to corrective lenses. However, decorative lenses continue to be illegally marketed and distributed directly to consumers through a variety of sources, including flea markets, the Internet, beauty salons and convenience stores. Consumers also report purchasing them at retail outlets, where they are sold as fashion accessories.

Risks associated with the improper use of decorative, or prescribed corrective contact lenses include conjunctivitis, swelling, allergic reaction and corneal abrasion due to poor lens fit. Additional medical problems may result in a reduction of visual acuity (sight), contrast sensitivity and other general eye and vision impairments.

According to the AOA, only a medical eye and vision evaluation from an eye doctor can determine whether or not patients are viable candidates to wear contact lenses, if they are capable of wearing lenses without problems, and that the lenses fit properly.

Even though they carry no prescription, and may be worn for short periods of time, decorative contact lenses carry the same risks as corrective contact lenses. Because of this, it's important for consumers utilizing these lenses to familiarize themselves with the information available from an eye doctor to reduce the risk of infection.

The AOA offers the following recommendations for contact lens wearers:

- Wear contact lenses only if they are fitted and prescribed by an optometrist.
- Do not purchase contact lenses from gas stations, video stores, record shops, or any other vendor not authorized by law to dispense contact lenses.
- Never swim while wearing contact lenses. There is a risk of eye infection when contact lenses come into contact with bacteria in swimming pool water.
- Make sure contact lenses are properly cleaned and disinfected as instructed by your eye-care professional.
- Make sure you wash your hands before handling and cleaning your contact lenses.
- Never swap or share contact lenses with anyone.
- Never sleep while wearing contact lenses unless they are extended-wear lenses specifically designed for that purpose.

For more information about the risks associated with decorative contact lenses, or to find additional resources pertaining to contact lens hygiene and compliance, please visit www.aoa.org.

About the American Eye-Q® survey:

The sixth annual American Eye-Q® survey was created and commissioned in conjunction with Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates (PSB). From May 19 – 23, 2011, using an online methodology, PSB interviewed 1,000 Americans 18 years and older who embodied a nationally representative sample of U.S. general population. (Margin of error at 95 percent confidence level)

About the American Optometric Association (AOA):

The American Optometric Association represents approximately 36,000 doctors of optometry, optometry students and paraoptometric assistants and technicians. Optometrists serve patients in nearly 6,500 communities across the country, and in 3,500 of those communities are the only eye doctors. Doctors of optometry provide two-thirds of all primary eye care in the United States.

American Optometric Association doctors of optometry are highly qualified, trained doctors on the frontline of eye and vision care who examine, diagnose, treat and manage diseases and disorders of the eye. In addition to providing eye and vision care, optometrists play a major role in a patient's overall health and well-being by detecting systemic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension.

Prior to optometry school, optometrists typically complete four years of undergraduate study, culminating in a bachelor's degree. Required undergraduate coursework for pre-optometry students is extensive and covers a wide variety of advanced health, science and mathematics. Optometry school consists of four years of post-graduate, doctoral study concentrating on both the eye and systemic health. In addition to their formal training, doctors of optometry must undergo annual continuing education to stay current on the latest standards of care. For more information, visit www.aoa.org.

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