

Presented by HealthyWomen

Contact Lenses for Children

Vision Correction: Glasses or Contacts?

Both glasses and contact lenses are good options for people who need vision correction. For children in need of vision correction, contact lenses have become a popular and easy alternative to glasses. Many parents think that contacts are not a viable option for their children. However, a growing body of research in children's vision correction continues to demonstrate that contact lenses provide significant benefits to children beyond correcting their vision, and that some children as young as 8 years of age who need vision correction are capable of wearing and caring for their contact lenses. Most kids who try contacts find them a comfortable option and prefer them over glasses.

Common Vision Problems for Children

The most common eye problems in children are caused by defects in the way the eyes focus light on the retina (the part of the eye that sends visual information to the brain). These defects, called *refractive errors*, cause a number of vision problems, including *myopia* (nearsightedness), *hyperopia* (farsightedness) and *astigmatism*. However, these problems can almost always be corrected with either eyeglasses or contact lenses. Nearsightedness typically develops around 8 years of age and worsens until age 15 or 16. Until recently, wearing soft contact lenses was thought to possibly accelerate the development of nearsightedness in children more than other vision correction options. But recent research has reversed this long-held myth.

Contact lenses provide significant benefits to children beyond correcting their vision.

According to a survey of parents of vision-corrected children 8 to 17 years old, nearly one-third say they have never considered contact lenses for their child even though half say that their child would rather be wearing contact lenses. Parents of a child who currently wears glasses say that their child dislikes wearing glasses (42%), does not always wear them when he/she should (41%) and sometimes feels self-conscious when wearing them (40%), according to the survey conducted by Fairfield Research among members of the Good Housekeeping Reader Advisory Panel on behalf of ACUVUE® Brand Contact Lenses. Many parents surveyed believe that contact lenses are a good occasional alternative to glasses for certain activities, especially sports.

Benefits Beyond Vision Correction

The benefits of contacts for children extend far beyond just improved vision. Studies have shown that children who wear contacts feel better about their physical appearance, athletic ability and social acceptance compared with kids who wear glasses. These children also report greater comfort with peer perception and higher satisfaction when engaging in social activities. Contacts can even help to improve academic confidence, especially among children who are unhappy with their glasses and

may not regularly wear them at school or to study. In particular, girls show an improved sense of self-confidence and self-worth when they wear contacts instead of glasses.

New data from a recently completed three-year, multisite study that assessed the effects of glasses and contact lenses on the self-perception of nearsighted children support earlier findings on improved self-confidence in children who wear contact lenses. The study found that contact lenses improve vision-related quality of life in children compared with glasses, especially in the areas of appearance and athletics.

What Kinds of Contacts Are Best for Children?

The type of contact lens your practitioner recommends will depend on your child's vision correction requirements. Both gas permeable and soft contact lenses have been used successfully with children.

Questions to Ask Your Health Care Professional

1. Are contact lenses appropriate vision correction for my child's vision problem?
2. Is my child old enough to use contact lenses?
3. What type of contact lenses would be best?
4. What is involved in caring for contact lenses?
5. How can I help my child properly maintain his or her lenses?

Disposable soft contact lenses (both the daily disposable and reusable varieties) are a popular choice for kids. Children who opt for reusable contacts need to remember to be vigilant about discarding and replacing their lenses. This can be marked on a family calendar, or kids can sign up with ACUMINDER™ (www.acuminder.com), a free online service that sends reminders via e-mail or text message. In a survey of ACUMINDER™ users, two out of three surveyed said that this free service has changed their contact lens wearing behavior. Daily disposable lenses can be a great option for kids who are not quite ready to take on the daily responsibility of cleaning and caring for their contacts. In fact, changing contact lenses more frequently can help prevent the habit of “stretching” contact lenses beyond the replacement schedule prescribed by an eye care professional. Discomfort and other eye related problems can occur for contact lens wearers who exceed the recommended wear and replacement schedule of a lens.

Parents may also want to explore contact lenses that offer UV protection. An estimated 80 percent of lifetime exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation occurs by age 18. While most sunglasses can help block UV rays from entering through the lenses, most frame styles do not prevent rays from reaching the eyes through the sides, top and bottom of the glasses. UV-blocking contact lenses, which should be worn in conjunction with high-quality UV-blocking sunglasses and a wide-brimmed hat, can provide

an important measure of additional eye protection. Most contact lenses, however, do not offer UV protection. Of those that do, not all provide similar absorption levels. For more information ask your child’s eye health professional for guidance.

Is My Child a Good Candidate for Contacts?

Age is one factor in determining whether a child is a good candidate for contacts, but not the only one. Most important is that your child wants to wear contacts and is mature enough to take care of them. Your eye care professional will also want to make sure that there are no underlying eye conditions that might interfere with a successful shift to contacts. Eye care professionals will typically evaluate a child’s maturity and level of parental support in deciding whether a child is ready for contact lenses. Determining whether children are good candidates for contacts can be as much a question of educating parents as educating children. Since parents know their children better than anyone else, you can help to determine whether your child is ready to take on the

responsibility. Parents also need to be willing to take on the expense of contact lenses and to encourage their children to care for and maintain the lenses. However, you won’t need to do all the work all of the time! Starting children with contacts at a young age can help to foster a budding sense of responsibility and instill self-care habits that will build over a lifetime.

The process of fitting a child for contacts is similar to that for adults. This includes selecting a lens that maximizes comfort, health and visual correction and providing children with thorough training on lens insertion and removal.

As your child adapts to contact lens wear, maintaining general eye health will play an important role. Your child should have regular eye exams, and you should always inform your eye care professional about any contact or eye-related problems.

Although contacts will not be the right answer for every child with vision problems, if your child seems like a good candidate, you should not hesitate to discuss this option with your eye care professional.

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