

Contact Lens Care: Sticking a Finger in Your Eye

Those clear, delicate spheres are game-changers for people with vision limitations. In the United States, [more than 45 million](#) wear contact lenses, according to the CDC.

But without good contact lens care, clear vision comes an increased risk of eye infections. Luckily, through daily routines and habits of contact lens care, this risk can be decreased substantially.

The most common contact-related issues that [Dr. Ranya Habash](#), an ophthalmologist with Bascom Palmer Eye Institute, sees in her office are keratitis and corneal ulcers. Keratitis is an inflammation of the cornea that can be caused by bacteria, virus or fungi. There is even a parasite (*Acanthamoeba keratitis*) that can invade your eye, causing serious infection and yes — even blindness. Infections can lead to corneal ulcers, which Dr. Habash likens to “a divot” on your cornea that can cause scarring and vision loss.

Dr. Habash describes the cornea as your eye’s windshield. “Contact lenses block the amount of oxygen getting to your cornea, and make it more prone to infections,” she says. Contacts become infected through germs in the environment that can grow on the contact if they are not cleaned properly.

Keep them clean

Don’t want a potentially serious eye infection? Keep your contacts – and keep everything that touches your lenses – clean.

Your hands: Wash them before you stick your fingers in your eyes. This seems like just common sense, but only 53-77 percent of contact lens wearers reported that they washed their hands before handling their contacts, according to a paper published in the journal [Clinical Optometry](#). “One study cited a 33% reduction in the potential for infection with good hygiene,” the authors wrote.

Contact lens cases: Change your cases every three to four months, says Dr. Habash. “Those cases can harbor infections, too. So, if you’re putting your contacts in an infected case, then putting them in your eyes - you’re exposing yourself to infection.”

A [study published in 2012](#) reported that people who did not replace their cases regularly increased their risk of infection by 6.5 percent. Those who did not have good “case hygiene” increased their risk by 5.5 percent.

Only clean your case with contact cleaning solution and not water.

“The best way to avoid all of this is to have daily wear lenses,” says Dr. Habash. “That way, when you go to bed at night, you can wash your hands, take them out and throw them away. Then, when you get up in the morning, you have a fresh pair.”

To clean your contacts: First, use solution, not saliva or tap water. For soft lenses, multi-purpose solution is the best choice for cleaning, rinsing, disinfecting and storing your contacts, says Dr. Habash. If you wear hard or specialty lenses, follow your doctor’s recommendations. NOTE: Saline solution does not clean your contacts. Only use it to rinse your contacts after cleaning them.

Replace your contact lens solution. “Every time I take out my contacts, I put them in new solution, and every time I put them back in, I throw out that solution,” says Dr. Habash, who is a contact lens wearer herself.

Never “top off” your solution, she adds. Instead of adding more solution to the case, pour out all of the old solution and replace it. Topping off can cause an invisible layer called [biofilm](#) to grow inside the case. That biofilm makes the solution less effective at killing germs that can cause serious eye infections, according to the CDC.

Don't sleep in your contact lenses

Snoozing in contact lenses (even extended wear) increases your chance of an eye infection by [6.5 times](#). Extended-wear contacts may be advertised as safe for use overnight. But, don't do it, says Dr. Habash. “Sleeping in your contacts is bad because the more time you spend in them, the more susceptible you are to an infection.”

For proper contact lens care, avoid wearing them while swimming or in hot tubs, and take them out while showering or bathing.

If you experience redness, light sensitivity, or a foreign body sensation in your eye, you should take out your contacts immediately and go see your doctor. And, never wear your contacts when you have an eye infection, says Dr. Habash.

There is one definite way that you can really reduce your risk of contact lens-related eye infections - consider getting [laser vision correction surgery](#). “LASIK comes with a one-time risk of infection at the time of surgery, but contact lenses have an ongoing continuous risk,” says Dr. Habash. “So, actually, the risk of having an infection is much higher in patients who wear contacts than for patients who get LASIK.”

“I wear them myself since I'm not a candidate for LASIK,” she says. “I know how useful they can be, and I want to present a balanced view of things.”

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