

CLINICAL EYE CARE

USING EYE DROPS OFF-LABEL WITH CONTACT LENSES

Experts weigh in on possible treatment options for contact lens wearers.

While most prescription eye drops have not been approved for use with contact lenses, doctors of optometry are discovering that some eye drops used off-label are safe and effective for contact lens wearers.

“Off-label” means the U.S. Food and Drug Administration did not approve that prescription or device to be used in that way or for that treatment. However, off-label use is quite common across all medical specialties.

Doctors of optometry have increasingly embraced off-label use of eye drops for contact lens wearers, says Pamela Lowe, O.D., a member of the AOA Contact Lens & Cornea Section (CLCS) who practices in Niles, Illinois. They are used primarily in two types of cases:

1. Eye irritation and dryness. To effectively treat eye irritation or dry eye, doctors need to first determine the cause of the irritation. For dry eye, it is important

to distinguish which of the three tear layers—oil, water or mucin—is affected. Lubricating drops are available to enhance each layer.

“Traditionally, contact lens wearers have been told to use hydrating drops (that replace the serous layer) and stay away from the drops that boost the mucin layer, the gel type, because thicker drops will coat lenses, causing a blur,” Dr. Lowe says. “It was also thought drops containing emollients to enhance the oil layer would cause contact lenses to be filmy. But recent studies are finding that many drops for the oil layer are helpful to the contact lens wearer because they help lenses stay moist longer without actually causing an oily blur.”

Gel drops and ointments still show no value to contact lens wearers, she says.

2. Abrasions. When patients suffer an eye abrasion or scratch, they are often given a

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bandage contact lens and an antibiotic eye drop. Medically approved bandage contact lenses must be special ordered and can be uncomfortable, but Dr. Lowe says commonly used, highly breathable and comfortable disposable contact lenses have been found to be excellent substitutes. Such contact lenses can act as a dose meter to keep the antibiotic eye drop on the eye's surface longer, making it more effective, says Burt Dubow, O.D., past chair of the AOA CLCS who practices in Waite Park, Minnesota.

Eye drops for allergies

Patients who wear contact lenses should still avoid using decongestant eye drops to combat allergy symptoms—a fact many patients are unaware of. Because decongestant eye drops are available over the counter and are often marketed to treat “red eye,” patients often self-medicate with them. But these drops simply constrict the blood vessels to reduce the red appearance and may mask the underlying problem.

“Those drops can dry the eye out more, can cause the contact lenses to have deposits on them, and if you overuse them, it can actually make your eye redder,” Dr. Lowe says.

Therefore, it's important to ask patients for details about eye discomfort or irritation and any over-the-counter eye drops they may be using. Patients may not think of eye drops as “medication” when filling out their intake forms, Dr. Lowe says. She likes to ask, “How long are you wearing your contacts before you can feel them?”

“That's a great way to elicit

what's going on with the patient,” she says. If you simply ask patients, “How are you doing?” they will often say fine because they think a little contact lens discomfort is normal. “The onus is on us as eye doctors to be sure we're asking the right questions,” Dr. Lowe says.

Antihistamine eye drops are a much safer and better option for treating the symptoms and discomfort of eye allergies, according to Dr. Dubow. And when used off-label with disposable contact lenses, their usefulness can be even greater and more convenient for patients. This is particularly true for the once-a-day prescription eye drops that most doctors of optometry prescribe, he says.

Preventing the need for eye drops

Dr. Lowe talks to her patients about nutrition and eye health before she prescribes or recommends eye drops. Most patients don't know that too much caffeine or not enough hydration can cause irritation. She also informs patients that eating foods rich in omega-3s can help keep their eyes lubricated. By educating patients, Dr. Lowe says, “sometimes I don't even have to turn to an eye drop.”

If you do plan to use eye drops off-label, do your research and consult with other doctors of optometry. “With such use comes a responsibility to know the meaning of off-label and the potential consequences,” Dr. Dubow says. —Melanie Padgett Powers

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