Complications of Contact Lenses

Wearing contact lenses is generally safe, but complications can occur.

As many as 45 million people in the US wear contact lenses to improve their vision. Contacts are generally safe, but several serious complications can occur, especially if proper care is not taken.

Common Complications

- **Discomfort**: An occasional or persistent uncomfortable feeling of the contact lens in the eye is common and tends to improve with use. Lubrication and gradually increasing wearing time can help eyes adapt to contacts.
- **Dry eye**: Dry eyes are worsened by contacts and may cause people to stop wearing them. Before stopping, talk to your eye doctor (ophthalmologist or optometrist) about artificial tears, prescription eye drops, or special plugs that may help.
- **Corneal infiltrates**: Contact lens wearers may develop these small, gray-white bumps on the eye surface. Many people have no symptoms, but some may notice redness or irritation. Talk to your eye doctor if these develop, as they may be a sign of infection.
- **Giant papillary conjunctivitis**: Long-term use of contacts can cause inflammation of the upper eyelid from rubbing over the contact lens. It typically causes itching or a sensation of having something in the eye, and people with the condition may become increasingly intolerant of contacts. This condition usually improves with proper contact lens care and taking a break from contacts. If it persists, allergy or steroid eye drops may help.

Serious Complications

- **Corneal neovascularization**: Wearing contacts reduces the amount of oxygen that the cornea receives from the surface of the eye (*hypoxia*), which can lead to swelling of the cornea. Over time, the cornea tries to get more oxygen by growing new blood vessels (*neovascularization*). If severe, the vessels can grow into the center of the cornea and cause vision loss.
- **Corneal abrasion**: Poorly fitting contacts or trauma during insertion or removal of contacts can cause a painful scratch on the cornea. This condition warrants seeing a doctor immediately. The doctor will stain the cornea with a dye to visualize the scratch and may prescribe antibiotic eye drops to prevent infection.
- **Infectious keratitis**: The most serious complication of contact lens use is an infection of the cornea (corneal ulcer). This complication, if left untreated, can cause total loss of vision in the affected eye. It is usually painful and may cause decreased vision, light sensitivity, discharge, redness, and white areas on the eye. Many different bacteria, as well as viruses or fungi, can cause infections in contact lens wearers. Patients with poorly controlled diabetes may have an increased risk of this complication.

Preventing Complications

It is very important to have good contact lens hygiene. This includes not sleeping, showering, or swimming while wearing contacts to reduce risk of serious complications. The risk of infectious keratitis can be reduced by using daily disposable contacts.

Warning Signs

Complications from contacts can have a wide range of symptoms. Talk to an eye doctor if any of the following symptoms occur, as they may be signs of a serious complication: redness or irritation, eye pain, sensitivity to light, blurry or worsening vision, excessive tearing, or discharge.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
https://www.cdc.gov/contactlenses/index.html