

General Optical Council

Buying cosmetic contact lenses



Cosmetic contact lenses, also known as zero-powered or plano lenses, are used to change the colour or appearance of the eyes. This booklet provides information to help ensure that consumers buy and use them safely.

What are cosmetic contact lenses?

Cosmetic contact lenses are coloured, patterned or novelty contact lenses. People use them for a variety of purposes, such as enhancing their appearance, for fashion, special effects in films, fancy dress or to mask the eye.

By law, they can only be supplied by, or under the supervision of, a registered optometrist, dispensing optician or medical practitioner.

What precautions are needed with cosmetic contact lenses?

Cosmetic contact lenses are effective for changing eye colour and appearance. But if consumers buy them from suppliers other than a registered practitioner, they may risk causing serious damage to their eyes.

Cosmetic lenses should be properly fitted by a qualified professional and ongoing care must be provided.

Consumers need to take the same degree of care when buying and wearing these lenses as with any other contact lenses. It is essential to have adequate instruction on lens care solutions and storage, hygiene and handling, wearing times and lens life, and follow all the recommended procedures.

Problems with cosmetic lenses usually involve unregulated lens sales, failing to follow instructions and poor hygiene. Provided they are handled and cared for properly, and used only according to the prescribing practitioner's recommendations, the risk of eye infection is very low.

What are the potential risks of cosmetic contact lenses?

Using contact lenses that are unsuitable for the eyes, or using them incorrectly, can cause serious eye problems including corneal ulcers and infections. Corneal ulcers can progress rapidly if left untreated. Uncontrolled infection can lead to corneal scarring and vision impairment. In extreme cases, blindness and eye loss may result.

Other risks associated with the use of these lenses include conjunctivitis, corneal swelling, allergic reactions, corneal abrasion and reduced vision.

The risks may be increased if a consumer uses someone else's lenses. This can spread infection between users, and is dangerous.

To help ensure safe use of cosmetic lenses

- Buy them only where there is a registered optometrist, dispensing optician or medical practitioner on the premises
- Have the lenses properly fitted by a qualified professional
- Follow all the lens wear and care advice given
- Have regular checkups
- Never share or swap lenses

What are the criminal offences involved?

Zero-powered lenses can be supplied only by or under the supervision of a registered optometrist, dispensing optician or medical practitioner.

Supervision requires the registered person to be present on the premises, aware of the procedure and in a position to intervene if necessary. The seller/supplier must also make arrangements for the wearer to receive ongoing care.

Any sales of cosmetic contact lenses that do not meet these requirements are illegal under the Opticians Act.

When we learn about alleged breaches of the Act, we take action. In the first instance, we will usually write to the seller and invite them to cease any illegal activity. Further action may be taken if necessary, for example, a private prosecution or liaison with the CPS or other public prosecuting body.

How do I report illegal sales?

We take all breaches of the Opticians Act seriously and will vigorously pursue allegations.

If you suspect someone of selling cosmetic contact lenses illegally, please report them to the GOC by calling 020 7580 3898 and selecting option 2.

About the GOC

We regulate opticians, students training to be opticians and optical businesses in the UK. There are currently around 24,000 optometrists, dispensing opticians, student opticians and optical businesses on our registers.

Our powers come from the Opticians Act 1989, as amended by the Opticians Act 1989 (Amendment) Order 2005 and related legislation. We are able to prosecute any business or individual who breaks the laws set out in the Act.

For more information

For more information and to read the law set out in the Opticians Act, please see our website www.optical.org.

You may also wish to contact:

British Contact Lens Association

7/8 Market Place
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Fax: 020 7580 6669

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Visit www.bcla.org.uk for a consumer guide to contact lenses.

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