

Alert for School Nurses, Administrators

RE: Illegally Purchased Cosmetic Colored Contact Lenses

Over the last few weeks, our Department has formed a task force to combat the growing problem of the illegal sale of cosmetic contact lenses that are sold primarily to teenagers. This practice poses a threat of eye infection and unnecessary vision loss to students. Our investigation culminated in an ABC Chicago News Expose on August 21, 2007, with the story of a woman who suffered painful loss of vision to these lenses. The ABC Documentary showed Department staff exposing the illegal sale of these lenses in a flea market, and described multiple non-medical locations around the state that sell these imported devices.

School Nurses are uniquely positioned to help with the efforts to stop unnecessary permanent vision loss due to the improper use of colored contact lenses sold in beauty supply stores and flea markets. We have seen here and throughout the country an increase in the reports of illegally sold colored contact lenses being misused.

1. Illegally sold cosmetic colored contact lenses are an “under the counter market” device that may or may not be FDA approved, and are bought at beauty supply stores, costume stores, or athletic stores. Since an eyecare professional is not available, there is no fitting, there are no handling instructions, or an explanation of the disinfection process. Without proper storage, these lenses will grow a variety of bacteria that are opportunistic to enter and infect the cornea. These lenses are sold in many minority neighborhoods and when infections begin, the wearers frequently have a poor understanding of the problem they are confronting, thus delaying treatment.
2. All contact lenses are medical devices, and as such, are regulated by the FDA. They are so marked, and as medical devices, they are to be fit by either an optometrist or ophthalmologist for safe wear. As young wearers have a good immune system, some will be fortunate to initially avoid infections. However, with recurrent use, and with improper storage and overwear, the abuse may eventually cause the infections and subsequent permanent scarring that may follow.
3. As the unsuspecting student wears the lenses for extended periods, the lens may tighten on the eye, making removal difficult, as the eye may be inflamed and irritated. They may deny to school nurses that they have ever had these lenses, again, delaying treatment. It is important to remember that the types of pathogens that are prevalent with soft contact lens related infections tend to be very aggressive, commonly causing substantial damage in **24 to 36 hours**. Therefore, obtaining proper diagnosis and treatment rapidly is vital to a successful outcome and recovery of vision.
4. Once the “red eye” enters the nurses office, the vision- threatening corneal infection that may leave the cornea permanently scarred and vision permanently decreased looks to the observer like the “pink eye” that only requires some ointment from the local physician. Again, the patient may give a history of no contacts, minimize the pain but there is an unusual amount of

redness with variable amounts of discharge. A close corneal observation under a microscope may give the tell- tale sign of a “white spot” on the cornea. Some may *continue to wear the lenses* because of the buffering effect that the lens offers the eye, but the infection smolders, causing more and more damage.

I hope the above reminders assist us in avoiding unnecessary vision loss for students who have either been taken advantage by the “under- the- counter” sales at cosmetic supply stores, or who mishandle their regular contacts and over- wear them or try the different- looking cosmetic lenses, and pay a heavy price with their vision by delayed treatment of these red eyes. **School nurses are a vital cog in the recognition and treatment process of these preventable and treatable infections.** Your vigilance and rapid action in suspected cases will save children’s vision.

Please report any known sales of these illegal cosmetic sales to 312-814-5858. If you have any questions, please contact me at Donald.Gordon@illinois.gov

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Pearls to remember are:

Tim McMahon, O.D., of the University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences, reminds that, “Cosmetic contact lenses are more likely to be shared with friends, causing more and more severe infections.”

Louise Sclafani, O.D., of the University of Chicago, Department of Ophthalmology, “Cosmetic contact lenses are more likely to be improperly stored in water, and may be exposed to the extremely infectious pathogens including acanthamoeba whose treatment may include hospitalization.” Adults should note students who suddenly present with a different eye color.