

## **Don't Let a Halloween Costume Cost You Your Vision**

Every year around Halloween, I get asked the same question: "Is it OK to wear costume contact lenses just for one night?"

Every year, my answer is the same: absolutely not.

As an ophthalmologist, I've seen firsthand what can go wrong when people treat contact lenses like costume accessories. The truth is, contact lenses are not fashion items. They are medical devices. They require a prescription, a professional fitting and proper hygiene. Buying cheap, unregulated costume lenses from a Halloween store or online vendor is very risky and should be avoided. That goes for both adults and children.

Unlike prescription lenses, contact lenses sold in costume shops or online costume marketplaces are not custom-made. Your eyes' shapes are unique, and each of your eyes may even be different. That means lenses must be properly fitted by a licensed professional, such as an optometrist or ophthalmologist. Ill-fitting lenses, especially those mass-produced for novelty purposes, can cause abrasions to your cornea, the clear dome-shaped surface of your eye. That's not just uncomfortable — it can be dangerous.

I've treated patients who thought they were getting harmless Halloween fun, only to end up with painful eye infections like conjunctivitis (commonly known as pinkeye) or worse, corneal ulcers. Eye injuries don't just ruin your night; they can leave you with long-term or even permanent vision loss.

Many people don't realize that costume lenses are often made from lower-quality plastic and are made to lower, non-health care standards. They can have rough surfaces. Use the most delicate part of the pinky finger to gently rub the inside of each lens. If anything sharp or rough is detected, do not place that lens on the eye.

Additionally, costume contact lenses may not be appropriately sterilized. Some may even have paint or pigment layered inside the lens in a way that irritates or scratches the eye. These products are rarely regulated and certainly not approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Just because you can find them at a flea market, costume shop or online costume retailer doesn't mean they're safe.

Another point I always stress is never to share contact lenses. Your eyes are one of the most sensitive areas for infection. Whether they're prescription or decorative, swapping lenses with a friend is a fast track to cross-contamination. Bacteria, fungi and viruses are easily transferred through contact lenses.

If you've already made the mistake of wearing costume lenses and your eye feels red, sore or irritated, don't wait it out. See your eye doctor or go to an emergency department immediately. Early symptoms may seem mild, but even a minor infection or abrasion can quickly turn serious. Eye specialists like myself are trained to detect subtle injuries early on and can take steps to minimize lasting damage, but only if we catch it in time.

Costume contact lenses aren't the only Halloween hazard, either. Poorly fitted masks can also damage your eyes. Masks that press against your eye socket can cause pressure injuries, while those with small eye holes can restrict your peripheral vision, making trips and falls more likely. If a mask is too loose, the upper part could sag inward and strike a part of the eye, causing an injury. If you're wearing a mask, make sure it fits snugly but not tightly, and doesn't block your view, especially when walking around at night or, worse, driving.

I understand the appeal. We all want to elevate our costumes with dramatic flair, such as zombie eyes, cat eyes and vampire eyes. However, no costume is worth risking your vision. Instead, consider eye-safe alternatives such as makeup or glasses frames that match your costume theme.

The bottom line is simple: only buy contact lenses from licensed eye care professionals. Once you have a prescription, you can safely order your lenses through reputable online retailers that verify your doctor's information. Under no circumstances should you buy lenses from unauthorized vendors or use someone else's.

When it comes to your eyes, one bad decision can cause permanent vision consequences. Halloween comes once a year, but your vision is for life. Protect it.

*Kelly Mitchell, M.D., is an ophthalmologist at Texas Tech Physicians.*