



Goodbye, glasses

Is your child ready for contact lenses?

BY LISA EVANS

"When can I get contact lenses?" I recall asking my parents when I was told I needed glasses at the age of 10; a time when girls want to fit in more than stand out. Toronto optometrist Andrea Mierzynski says there's no straightforward rule about when kids can get contact lenses, although she suggests around the age of 12.

"At that age, I feel that they might be mature enough to understand the responsibilities of caring for and wearing contacts," she says. Depending on the circumstances, though, kids as young as eight can use contact lenses with parental guidance.

In deciding whether a child is ready for contacts, Dr. Mierzynski takes into account the responsibility involved in caring for the lenses and the psychological readiness of the child. Children who are squeamish when getting drops in their eyes or who don't follow good personal hygiene - requiring prompting from parents to wash their hands and brush their teeth - may not be ready for contact lenses.

"I have some parents who say, 'If

you saw their room you wouldn't trust them to clean their contacts,'" says Dr. Mierzynski. Even children with messy rooms who want to wear contacts to play sports, for example, may be well suited for daily contact lenses that are worn for a few hours and thrown out after one use.

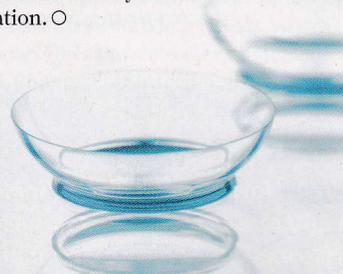
The health of the eye is another indicator of whether contact lenses are the right choice. "Contact lenses are a medical device," says Dr. Mierzynski. Although contacts can be purchased online, she encourages parents to get a proper fitting by an optometrist to avoid infection or discomfort.

"You wouldn't buy shoes without trying them on. We're talking about your eyes," she says. The optometrist will discuss the various types of contact lenses, including daily, weekly or monthly and soft versus hard lenses, and will measure the eye to make sure the lens fits properly. A lens that is too tight, for example, won't provide proper oxygen to the eye and can cause serious damage.

During an instructional session,

kids learn how to handle the lenses without dropping or damaging them. Dr. Mierzynski likes patients to practice inserting and removing the lenses three times to ensure comfort with the technique. She then goes through the rules of contact lens wear including recommended and maximum daily wear time, rules around sharing lenses (never), cleaning techniques, and when it's appropriate to swap out contacts for glasses.

She recommends young patients return a week later to ensure proper fit of the lenses and encourages parents to call if there's any discomfort or irritation. ○



Does your child need glasses?
Go to ParentsCanada.com/glasses

WHY make THE SWITCH?

Wearing contact lenses isn't only about style. Toronto optometrist Dr. Andrea Mierzynski explains the benefits:

➤ **CONVENIENCE:** Kids who are physically active can reap great convenience benefits from contact lenses. "Glasses can get knocked off, they can fog up and they can get easily damaged." Glasses can also be cumbersome underneath a visor or hockey helmet, for example.

➤ **VISION ENHANCEMENT:** When wearing glasses, vision is through the optical centre of the glasses, which means peripheral vision is limited. Because contacts move with the eyes, you're always looking with the optical centre of the lens meaning vision will be crystal clear in all directions, giving kids in sports a competitive edge.

➤ **BOOST SELF-ESTEEM:** Contact lenses also provide freedom of choice. "A lot of tweens and teens like contacts for social reasons. They don't like the appearance of themselves in glasses and they just want to fit in."

PAYING THE PRICE

The cost of contact lenses varies depending on the type of lens.

- **DISPOSABLE LENSES:** \$200 - \$300 per year
- **TORIC LENSES** (that correct for astigmatism): \$400 - \$500 per year
- **DAILY DISPOSABLES:** \$25 - \$35 for a box of 30, which, if worn every day, can add up to more than \$300 a year.

Contact lenses can appear to be more expensive than glasses (kids' eyeglasses can run anywhere from \$200 - \$400). But replacing eyeglass lenses with every new prescription can be very costly. In the hands of children, glasses are more easily damaged, requiring more regular repairs or replacements.