

BEFORE HALLOWEEN HOCUS-POCUS, Focus on Eye Safety

By Jonna Jefferis

Each year on Halloween, trick-or-treating children roam the streets for a night of candy, fun, spooks and disguises. In the excitement of the holiday, eye safety usually takes a backseat when planning costumes, accessories and face design. It shouldn't. The most common reasons children visit the hospital on Halloween, according to the American College of Emergency Physicians, are eye injuries caused by sharp objects, burns from flammable costumes and car accidents as children trick-or-treat in the neighborhood.¹ These are all injuries associated with the holiday, and they are all preventable.

The special and unique elements of Halloween—costumes, makeup and walking in the dark—hide risks that make it particularly important for parents to consider their children's eyes when planning Halloween safety strategies. These must include steps to ensure that your trick-or-treater will enjoy clear, unobstructed vision; and that his eyes will be protected from both injury and infection.

To See and Be Seen

Will your youngster's costume enable her to see where she is going? Make sure that masks, wigs, hats, hoods and scarves do not block vision, and that they fit snugly enough to not slip down over the eyes. Seeing clearly will help your child to avoid such accidents as tripping over uneven concrete or stepping in front of a moving vehicle.

Your youngster's pirate costume should not include an eye patch, which impedes vision. There are alternative ways to create a scary pirate look. Suggest adding to the costume a blacked-out tooth, creepy eye makeup or a toy knife attached to a wide, black belt, for example.

Tell your teenager that wearing a mask while driving is dangerous. Even a mask with large openings for the eyes can block peripheral (side) vision, which is needed for safe driving.

Finally, arm your trick-or-treater with a lightweight flashlight to illuminate dark sidewalks, steps and yards. A flashlight will also signal his presence to drivers.

Injury-Proof Costume Accessories

Your child's costume may demand the authenticity that only a sword, wand or spear can confer. If such an accessory is required, purchase (or construct) one that is made of a soft, flexible material without sharp points or edges. You don't want your child to brandish a pointed, hard plastic toy sword near his friends' eyes.

Fluorescent light sticks are popular with kids and provide night-time visibility for drivers, but they can also be dangerous. If the light stick should become punctured, the chemicals inside can leak, causing severe pain if they come into contact with your child's eye.²

Makeup: Better Than a Mask

Safer and more fun than wearing a hot, itchy face mask is to create a unique Halloween character with makeup. While face-painting allows you and/or your child to be wonderfully creative, care must be taken so that eyes are not injured and do not become infected.

Prevent Blindness America and the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) recommend these make-up safety tips:^{3, 4, 5}

- Wash your hands before applying cosmetics, and keep eye applicators clean to prevent infection.
- Hypoallergenic makeup is the safest, but still requires careful application to keep it from getting into the eyes.
- Makeup applied around the eyes should be expressly intended for use near the eyes. If your teen, in her quest to achieve the "undead" look, uses a red lip liner on her eyelids, warn her that in doing this, she risks transferring harmful bacteria from her mouth into her eyes and possibly causing an infection. Fluorescent (sometimes called "neon" or "day-glow") and luminescent (glow-in-the-dark) colors are also not intended for use near the eyes, as they can cause damage.
- Finally, remove all makeup at bedtime, either with cold cream or according to package directions.

Be Smart About Costume Contacts

Your teenager may want to enhance his costume by wearing decorative contact lenses. These plano (non-corrective) lenses come in a variety of styles that change the appearance of the eyes, and are popular as Halloween costume accessories for the theatrical element they add. There are “vampire red” and “zombie white-out” lenses, as well as those that mimic the eyes of cats, snakes or wolves.

If your child has his heart set on wearing special-effect lenses, be aware that under the law, their purchase requires a prescription—just as corrective contact lenses do—to ensure eye safety. The U.S. Congress passed a law in 2005 against the sale of these lenses through any outlet other than a licensed eye care professional. However, some costume shops, convenience stores, beauty shops and video outlets may continue to sell them illegally, without requiring a prescription or providing a professional fitting.

Each Halloween, the American Optometric Association and FDA warn consumers about the risks of infection and permanent eye injury from the use of illegally sold decorative contact lenses.^{16, 7} These warnings are based on actual reports before the law became effective. Included were reports of injuries severe enough to cause blindness in one case and to require a corneal transplant in another. Several other victims suffered permanent corneal scarring.⁸

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Nothing in this article is intended, nor should it be construed, as professional advice. Those reviewing the information should consult with a qualified professional.

SOURCES

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^{2/} “Darth Vader, Dora the Explorer...or Dioxins?” *The Green Guide*, Oct. 4, 2006, National Geographic Web site. Sept. 2008. <http://www.thegreenguide.com/doc/110/costumes>

^{3/} “Avoid Scary Accidents This Halloween!” 2005. Prevent Blindness America Web site, The Vision Learning Center, Halloween Safety Tips. Sept. 2008. <http://www.preventblindness.org/safety/halloweensafety.html>

^{4/} “Halloween Special for Kids and Parents: Novelty Makeup.” Sept. 25, 2001; revised Oct. 31, 2007. U.S. Food & Drug Administration Web site, Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition (CFSAAN)/Office of Cosmetics and Colors. Sept. 2008. <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/cos10-31.html>

^{5/} “Eye Cosmetic Safety,” Aug. 1, 2001; updated Dec. 18, 2006. U.S. Food & Drug Administration Web site, Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition (CFSAAN)/Office of Cosmetics and Colors Fact Sheet. Sept. 2008. <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/coseye2.html>

^{6/} “Warning for Consumers: Popular Halloween Eye Wear Accessory Can Permanently Damage Eyes.” 2008. American Optometric Association Web site. Sept. 2008. <http://www.aoa.org/x8699.xml>

^{7/} “FDA Reminds Consumers of Serious Risks of Using Decorative Contact Lenses Without Consulting Eye Care Professional.” Oct 27, 2006. U.S. Food & Drug Administration Web site. Sept. 2008. <http://www.fda.gov/bbs/topics/NEWS/2006/NEW01499.html>

^{8/} “Emory Eye Center Suggests Passing Up Those Halloween Eyes: Over-the-Counter Cosmetic Contact Lenses Pose Unseen Dangers.” Oct. 20, 2003. Emory Eye Center Web site, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, Emory Health Sciences press release. http://www.whsc.emory.edu/~releases?2003october/hallow_eyes.html

Created Sept. 2008; last modified Dec. 2008

Here are three reasons why purchasing contact lenses from unlicensed dealers is risky:

1. With no prescription, the lenses are not properly fitted, which could cause corneal abrasions.
2. Because over-the-counter contact lenses are not FDA-approved, they might have been manufactured improperly, decorated with an unsafe dye or packaged with unsterile materials.
3. Lack of instruction from an eye care professional regarding lens wear and care could lead to risky behaviors that might result in a dangerous eye infection. These include not keeping the lenses clean, wearing them while swimming or sleeping, and sharing them with another person.

So if your son asks you to buy some scary contact lenses that he saw in a party store, instead take him to an eye care professional for an eye examination and a prescription. The provider will order the lenses that your child wants from a reputable source. This step will not spoil his fun; it will allow him to enjoy the holiday with clear and comfortable vision—a smart goal for everyone this Halloween.