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Patient Safety Advocates Call for Immediate Action to Protect Patients' Vision Health Amid COVID-19 Pandemic

With many doctors of optometry caring for patients via telehealth or working with reduced staff, Alliance for Patient Safety calls for the FTC to require online retailers to seek written electronic prescription verification, enforce federal patient health safeguards related to contact lens sales

(Alexandria, Va.) – On May 11, the Health Care Alliance for Patient Safety (APS) [sent a formal letter](#) to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) asking for immediate action to protect the eye health and safety of contact lens patients across the country amid the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

While doctors of optometry across the country are continuing to provide essential care for emergency issues, their hours and staff have been significantly reduced to comply with [CDC guidance](#). Recent [Jobson Optical Research data](#) shows that over 90 percent of respondents' practices are in a locality under a stay-at-home order, which means doctors are not in their offices unless there is an emergency issue. The report also shows that up to 60 percent of optometrists have had to let go of staff as a result of the pandemic, and that 44.5 percent of those doctors have had to lay off their entire staff. Combined, these two factors mean that optometry practices are facing challenges in responding to contact lens prescription verification telephone calls, meaning patients could end up receiving contact lenses other than those they were prescribed.

Given the data, APS is calling on the FTC to increase its enforcement of the federal patient health safeguards related to contact lens sales during this time. While APS wants to ensure patients can safely maintain access to contact lenses during this time, APS members are deeply concerned that online contact lens sellers that continue to violate the patient safety standards as written in the Contact Lens Rule and the Fairness to Contact Lens Consumers Act (FCLCA) pose an increased risk to patient safety during the pandemic.

In the [letter to the FTC](#), APS Chair Dr. Deanna Alexander, O.D., said:

“Certain online retailers’ continuing use of antiquated robocall prescription verification is deeply disturbing during this pandemic when doctors are not physically in the office and/or do not have the staff capacity to answer the calls. Even during normal times, these robocalls require significant follow-up by doctors and their staff, as the information they provide is often incomplete, difficult/impossible to understand, or related to a person who has never been a patient of the eye doctor receiving the call. Additionally, they too frequently provide no option to replay the call to confirm the information or a valid call-back number to contact if the information about the prescription is incorrect. If we are to properly ensure patient safety and effectively expand available hospital capacity during the COVID-19 pandemic, we must close regulatory loopholes that allow for the sale of nonprescribed lenses that result in patient harm.”

APS members agree that substituting contact lenses can result in significant injury, including corneal ulcers and impaired or full loss of vision. One common adverse health event related to improper contact lens wear/the use of lenses is keratitis, a painful eye infection that leads to 1 million doctor and hospital visits

annually, at a cost of \$175 million to the U.S. healthcare system. The APS [supports the modernization of the contact lens prescription verification process](#), which would help ensure patients receive the contact lenses prescribed by their eye care professional, keeping them safer from threats to eye health. APS and will continue to advocate for the use of written verification methods to ensure compliance on all sides.

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