

The Solution is Also the Problem

By Reg P. Wydeven
April 29, 2006

In the summer before my freshman year of high school, I got contact lenses. Finally, I didn't have to worry about keeping mud and grass off my glasses during football games. I didn't have to worry about getting my glasses knocked off and accidentally stomped on during basketball practice. And most importantly, I finally didn't have to worry about looking up in the sky and have the sun's rays beam through my thick glasses and start my face on fire.

Contact lenses were the cure to all my worries, but they might be the cause of great worry for some of my vision-impaired brethren.

The federal Food and Drug Administration and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently announced that they have identified over 100 Fusarium keratitis eye infections in the U.S. dating back to June of 2005.

Federal and state health officials have thus far only interviewed just 30 of the infected patients, however, 28 of them wore soft contact lens, and 26 of which reported using Bausch & Lomb's ReNu with MoistureLoc brand contact lens solution.

Fusarium is commonly found in tropical plants and soil. Without proper treatment, which consists of eye drops for two to three months, the infection can scar the cornea and blind its victims, sometimes requiring cornea transplants. Symptoms include blurry vision, pain or redness, increased sensitivity to light and excessive discharge from the eye. The infection is not contagious.

The FDA has found no direct link between the infected patients and ReNu other than the high incidence of the affected people who have used the solution. Bausch & Lomb is quick to add that 5 of the 26 patients also reported using other types of solutions in addition to ReNu, and 9 claimed they wore their lenses overnight, which is known to increase the risk of infection.

As a result of the infections, Bausch & Lomb has agreed to stop shipping ReNu. Wal-Mart, the nation's largest retailer, pulled ReNu from its shelves, along with Supervalu Inc., which runs Save-A-Lot supermarkets, and Rite Aid Corp., the U.S.'s third largest drugstore chain. Walgreen Co., America's largest drugstore chain, pulled all of Bausch & Lomb's products from their shelves, not just ReNu.

In February, Bausch & Lomb halted sales of ReNu in Singapore and Hong Kong because of an increase of the infection in certain parts of Asia. In March, Bausch & Lomb launched an investigation in Asia to determine the extent and the cause of this increase. The company will now be cooperating with the domestic investigation performed by the FDA and the CDC, as well as Johns Hopkins Wilmer Eye Institute.

Even though there is no link between Bausch & Lomb and the Fusarium infections, the FDA is still warning contact lens wearers who use ReNu with MoistureLoc to do so with caution. If a link can be established, it will certainly open a floodgate of lawsuits. More than 30 million Americans wear contact lenses, and the ReNu brand generated \$45 million in U.S. sales in 2005.

Bausch & Lomb's deep pockets have shrunk, though, since new of the infections broke - the company's stock price has decreased by almost 10%.

Even if I got infected any my eyes were puff, red and watery, I'd still look cooler than I do with glasses.

This article originally appeared in the Appleton Post-Crescent newspaper and is reprinted with the permission of Gannett Co., Inc. © 2005 McCarty Curry Wydeven Peeters & Haak, LLP. All rights reserved.