



Let's talk contact lenses

An increasing majority of optical practitioners believe that recommending contact lenses is financially beneficial – with a quarter of patients now wearing lenses for vision correction. **Joe Ayling** reports on the latest research

An *Optician* study, sponsored by CIBA Vision, revealed 72 per cent of practitioners believe recommending contact lenses is financially beneficial, compared to 66 per cent in a similar survey four years ago. From a respondent group of optometrists, dispensing opticians and contact lens opticians, 17 per cent said they thought contact lens recommendations were not financially worthwhile, with 11 per cent uncertain.

Andrew Elder Smith, professional marketing manager, CIBA Vision UK, said: 'Practitioners and business owners have realised it isn't a case of spectacles or contact lenses – it's both. Contact lens business can also bring the benefits of direct-debit payments bringing a regular revenue stream and patient loyalty.'

Practitioners in the study, from a mixture of independent and multiple practices, estimated that 25 per cent of their patients used contact lenses, despite the fact that 52 per cent were considered suitable. This could be explained partly by how the idea of wearing contact lenses was presented to those patients suitable for doing so.

Elder Smith said: 'This partly comes



The study found that 65 per cent of patients who had an assessment went on to purchase contact lenses

down to the fact that not everybody is having a conversation about contact lenses and there is also a fear factor for patients to overcome.

'The normal question practitioners tend to ask is "would you be interested in wearing contact lenses?" to which the answer is often "no I wouldn't be", as people perceive themselves as being spectacle wearers and are reluctant to change.

'If you asked most people if they'd like to do a bungee jump they would say no, but if they saw it being done and thought about it and knew other people had done it, they'd come round to it. This is an extreme example, but if there is a lack of conversation leading up to asking the big question then a refusal is more likely.'

Further analysis was carried out on when the option of contact lenses was being mentioned during the patient journey (News 04.05.12). It found just 12 per cent mentioned them as part of every encounter with a patient who required vision correction, while a majority of 52 per cent did so 'most of the time' (Figure 1).

Findings showed that 48 per cent were only occasionally telling patients about multifocal lenses, with 41 per cent mentioning them frequently and 9 per cent always. For toric lenses, 25

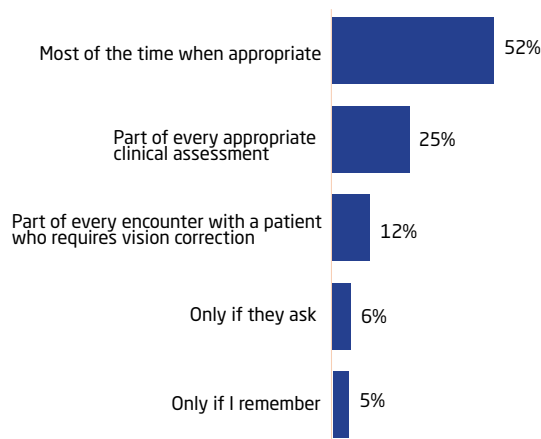


Figure 1 When contact lenses are initially mentioned as an option

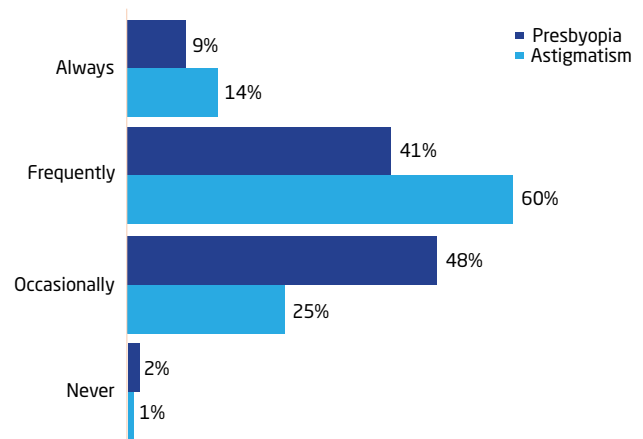


Figure 2 How often contact lenses are discussed with presbyopic or astigmatic patients



per cent mentioned them occasionally, 60 per cent frequently and 14 per cent always (Figure 2).

Elder Smith added: 'The conversation needs to be happening early in the patient journey, so that when they get their reminder letter it is communicated, when they make their appointment it is mentioned and when they come into the practice contact lenses are discussed. So that rather than being something special and something big, contact lenses become normal and something you do when you need vision correction – you have glasses and contact lenses.'

Follow-up

The *Optician* study found that following a contact lens assessment period, 72 per cent of practitioners encouraged patients to order by setting up a follow-up appointment, while 51 per cent did so through a care scheme, 31 per cent with lifestyle questionnaires and 21 per cent with special offers. Special offers were used by 14 per cent of independents and 34 per cent of chains.

Elder Smith said it was concerning that 28 per cent of patients were not having follow-up appointments, while even fewer were being signed up to care schemes. 'If you follow up and sign people up on the day it will give you a better chance of getting people to purchase,' he added. 'At the end of the assessment people should be pleased and wowed to be wearing the lenses so it's a good time to ask them to sign up.'

Overall, the research found that 65 per cent of patients who had undertaken an assessment went on to purchase contact lenses. Internet sales were not seen as a significant threat to purchases in the study. An almost equal number of practitioners

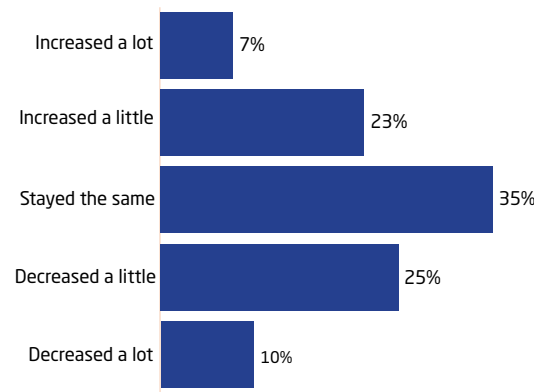


Figure 3 Estimation of increase or decrease of business since contact lenses have been widely available online

said their contact lens business had increased since they had become available on the web as those saying it had decreased (Figure 3).

Handling issues

Of those patients who dropped out after a contact lens assessment, half said they found them too difficult to put in. Meanwhile, 30 per cent said they did not feel their vision had improved sufficiently and 26 per cent found them uncomfortable.

'My experience in practice is that most people seem to be able to handle the lens, so I am quite surprised that is the main reason,' Elder Smith said. 'It is important to put aside enough time for competent teaching appointments to address this issue, encourage patients to come back for a second go if they cannot manage the first time, and try different kinds of lenses.'

Comfort comparisons with different brands in each eye were also suggested. It was found that 88 per cent of respondents had already tried this, but for 69 per cent only occasionally. Elder Smith encouraged this practice as a way to get patients involved and engaged in the fitting process, and

SAMPLE BREAKDOWN

- The *Optician* Contact Lens Survey 2012, sponsored by CIBA Vision, took place in March 2012, involving 248 respondents from practices throughout the UK. Of the respondents, 56 per cent were from independent optical practices and 40 per cent from multiple or franchise chains. The remainder were eye care professionals from hospitals, supermarkets and manufacturers

- In terms of job role, 69 per cent of respondents were optometrists, while 18 per cent were dispensing opticians and 10 per cent contact lens opticians. It was established that 81 per cent of them personally fitted contact lenses. An equal geographical spread including Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland took part, with the largest number of respondents from the Midlands

- It was possible to further analyse the different responses of independents and multiple chains for some of the results obtained. For example, 57 per cent of multiples said they believed patients had not purchased contact lenses after their trial because they found the lens too difficult to put in, compared to 43 per cent of independents

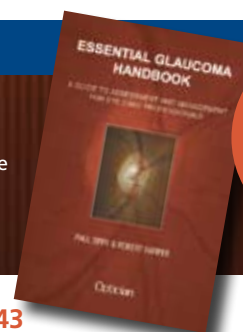
aware that all contact lenses are not the same. Therefore, communicating the option of contact lenses in addition to spectacles required a consistent approach throughout the patient journey. Practitioners have a number of tools at their disposal for this and most recognise the financial benefits of using them, especially if patient orders are to spring back at an equal velocity as the aforementioned bungee chord. ●

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