

How to support contact lens wearers for success

Contact lens wearers are important for business growth and it is important to keep them satisfied and wearing their lenses. **Ella Ewens** reviews the latest research and practitioner opinion to give practical advice on how to best support new and existing contact lens wearers

Contact lens (CL) wearers are without doubt an important part of an optical practice. CL wearers are loyal patients who return to the practice regularly, mostly wear spectacles in addition to lenses and spend more on optical products overall.¹ Last year in the UK, 0.57 million patients started wearing CLs² and with the obvious advantages for cosmesis and sporting activities, they continue to be a popular vision correction option. Successful CL wearers are happy patients who have a positive economic impact on the practice.¹ However, there is a dropout problem, with almost as many wearers discontinuing (0.46 million) as there are new wearers. The CL dropout rate is around 10 per cent,² with the UK having one of the highest dropout rates in Europe.³

Today with the array of new lens technologies, there are many options available to satisfy patient needs. However, the process of ensuring a patient continues to successfully wear CLs is a complex one involving many factors: the practitioner and the practice, the patient, the lenses and lens care regime.

How big is the problem?

Lens wearer discontinuations may not always be noticeable – patients do not phone up and say they are going to stop wearing their lenses; they just simply fade away into the background. Are practitioners aware of the dropout issue or do they underestimate the number of wearers lapsing?

A recent online survey conducted by *Optician* (29.11.13) looked at current practitioner perceptions on CL wearer retention.⁴ Of the 502 respondents, around half felt retaining patients in CL wear was a very or fairly significant problem

TABLE 1
Reasons that CL wearers drop out⁵

CL uncomfortable to wear/irritated eyes	56%
Too much time/effort to apply and remove	29%
CL uncomfortable in evening/end of day	26%
Made my eyes dry	25%
Did not like putting fingers on eye	18%
Lenses too expensive	18%
Preferred glasses	17%
Too much time/effort to care for CLs	16%
Vision was poorer/not better with CL	14%

(48 per cent). Practitioners are generally aware of the dropout issue and actually slightly over-estimate the numbers of patients that will drop out (24 per cent compared with 10 per cent from industry data).² Although half the respondents felt that the dropout rate had stayed around the same in the last three years, some 21 per cent felt it had increased. The remaining more optimistic practitioners felt the dropout rate had reduced due to a wider range of lens options and better lens technology to help with discomfort and dryness. Dropout rates have most likely decreased over the last 10 years, due to major advances

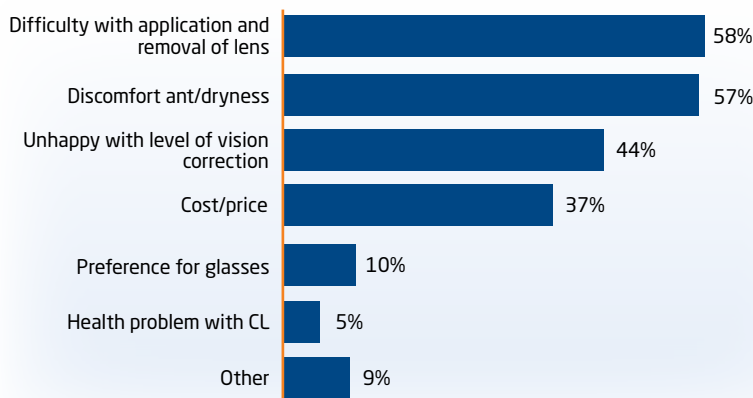
in CL comfort technology. However there remains a further opportunity to reduce drop out.

Who is most at risk of dropout?

Presbyopic patients were considered to be most at risk of dropping out, with 40 per cent of practitioners feeling the over-50s were most likely to discontinue.⁴ In contrast to this, recent research found that almost half of those who discontinue CL wear were under the age of 30.

Practitioners felt that new CL wearers in the first three to six months were most at risk. This matched industry research which showed that of those that lapse, one in three did so in the first three months. Practitioners said that daily disposable lenses (DDs) were the modality with the highest retention rate (60 per cent). However data shows that drop out occurs across all modalities and materials types so anything we can do to improve retention will benefit both the patient and the practitioner.⁵ Silicone hydrogel (SiH) lenses were considered to be the material with the highest retention rate by practitioners (62 per cent). However, there is currently no abundant evidence that daily wear SiH lenses

Figure 1
Reasons why new wearers are believed to drop out of CL wear⁴





have significantly improved comfort compared to hydrogels,⁶ and so it is not known if SiH wearers are going to have a higher retention rate than hydrogel wearers.

Why do CL wearers drop out?

The most commonly cited reason in the literature for CL dropout is discomfort which accounts for around 50 per cent of dropouts (range 30-80 per cent).⁷ Research matches practitioner views,⁴ with comfort being seen as by far the major reason for lapsing (70 per cent). When asked about the key factors for CL retention – suitability of the lens to the patient's lifestyle came out on top (65 per cent), followed by price. Contrastingly, research of 8,000 patients in Europe found that the most important factors for a patient when choosing a lens were comfort, quality of vision, dryness and health. Price was ranked the least important factor by patients in choosing a lens.⁸ As shown in Table 1, comfort is the most important reason for CL dropout; however, practitioners perceive that price is a much greater issue than their patients do.

In the first three months of wear, difficulty with application and removal is the key reason for drop out.⁹ Figure 1 shows similarly that the surveyed practitioners feel handling is important in the first few months.

New wearers - first impressions matter

A recent round-table discussion with practitioners from around the UK addressed some of the key issues for retention and best practices for keeping CL wearers. New and existing CL wearers differ – the reasons they might drop out, the challenges they present and the support they require; both groups are important for a successful CL practice. It was agreed that the patient experience in the first few months was crucial – giving the patient one-on-one time early on, listening carefully to their lifestyle needs and managing their expectations. Once a patient has had a bad experience, it's very difficult to get them back into a trial. Investing time in new wearers and giving them the support they need could help to differentiate your practice. It is important to inform patients that they are at the beginning of their CL journey and there are many more lens options if the initial one doesn't work out.



Figure 2 Use a variety of printed material and leaflets to help patients with their lens wear and care

Practitioners surveyed were aware that CL patients were most at risk during their first few months of CL wear.⁴ Half of the practitioners carry out a two-week CL trial for their CL wearers,⁴ and the round-table participants also agreed that giving patients a sufficiently long trial period was important to a successful outcome.

So, for new wearers setting realistic expectations in a positive manner is the right approach, plus taking time during the fitting and trial period to discuss their needs.

Support staff - an integral part in managing your CL patients

A key reason for dropout of new wearers is difficulties with application and removal.⁹ Front-of-house staff are an essential support for CL patients, especially when it comes to teaching CL wearers how to handle and care for their lenses. Half of the practitioners surveyed delegated the CL training session to a support staff member, while many practitioners conducted the training themselves (34 per cent).⁴ Teach your staff how to give hands-on training to patients for all lens types, including handling, wear, care and common early problems, to free up valuable practitioner time. Approachable and well trained support staff help make the CL patient journey run smoothly. Ideally they should be good communicators and demonstrators to aid the patient in their initial adjustment to wearing and handling CLs.

Many practitioners (72 per cent) use a dedicated area for application

and removal training. This allows the patient to master CL handling quietly, away from the busy areas in the practice. The most popular methods used to support wearers during the teach appointment were training sessions and discussions.⁴ Videos, apps and handouts can also be useful to aid in the CL teach.^{4,10}

Practices can assign a CL 'buddy' to each patient. This is a member of staff whose responsibility is to help the patient through their first months of wear. They train the patient on lens handling and care, and provide them with personalised take-home materials. The CL buddy can be responsible for keeping in contact with the new wearer by phone, email or text to see how they are getting on during the first few weeks, and book any further aftercare appointments as required. The buddy technique gives the support staff member clear responsibilities and accountability, and the patient benefits from a personalised approach with ongoing support.

Interestingly, only 38 per cent of practitioners surveyed contacted all or some of their new CL wearers during this crucial period, mostly by phone (91 per cent).⁴ So empower your support staff to keep in contact with new wearers and help them with any early teething problems they may encounter.

Existing wearers - comfort is most important for retaining happy CL wearers

Satisfied wearers are essential for a successful CL practice; they go on to recommend the practitioner and the practice to others and benefit the business in the long term.¹ For existing wearers, the challenges tend to be comfort, vision and compliance.

Careful questioning is required to establish if a patient is really satisfied with their CL comfort. A closed question such as 'Are your lenses comfortable?' is unlikely to find out enough information to determine whether the patient is truly happy. Patients understand a wide range of definitions when they hear the words 'eye comfort', and it was recently established that eye comfort decreases throughout the day regardless of CL wear.¹¹ Further questioning such as the time of day that the lens becomes uncomfortable, number of comfortable wearing hours, type of discomfort and the use of comfort



scales (eg on a scale of 1-10 where 10 is extremely comfortable and 1 is not comfortable) can give much more precise information. Following a thorough history it is important to choose the best lens for the patient's comfort and lifestyle needs. In many cases a flexible approach can be taken, such as prescribing DDs for use on holiday and reusable lenses the rest of the time.

A questionnaire could be employed in practice that patients complete before they enter the consulting room with probing questions about satisfaction of their current lenses, wearing time, comfort and vision. This tool can quickly identify those that have comfort or other issues and can then be refitted with a more suitable lens if needed. Practitioners need to stay abreast with current CL technology so that they can recognise when a patient would benefit from an alternative CL. Equally, if the patient is in the best lens for their current needs, it is important to reassure them of this.

There continues to be a great deal of research and discussion on CL comfort. The recent CL Discomfort Workshop Report from Tear Film and Ocular Surface (TFOS) looked at key factors that may influence CL comfort: material, surface properties, modality, design and care regimen.⁷ Silicone hydrogel lenses have reduced the rate of complications associated with hypoxia and have allowed for greater wearing times.

However, the hydrophobic nature of silicone has introduced challenges for CL manufacturers,¹² and hydrogel lenses still account for 47 per cent of DD fits.¹³ SiH lenses have not reduced the risk of adverse events, but some studies show that they decrease the severity and duration of significant adverse events.¹⁴ Studies have shown that oxygen permeability (Dk) is not linked to comfort, and there is little evidence that bulk properties such as water content and ionicity are linked to comfort. The edge design of the CL is important, with a tapered edge giving the best comfort for a patient. Modality is likely to have an impact on CL comfort, changing a lens more often may decrease the risk of complications and improve comfort and vision due to less deposition on the lens surface.

When considering a CL that delivers excellent comfort to your patient, surface properties are highly relevant. A CL with a low

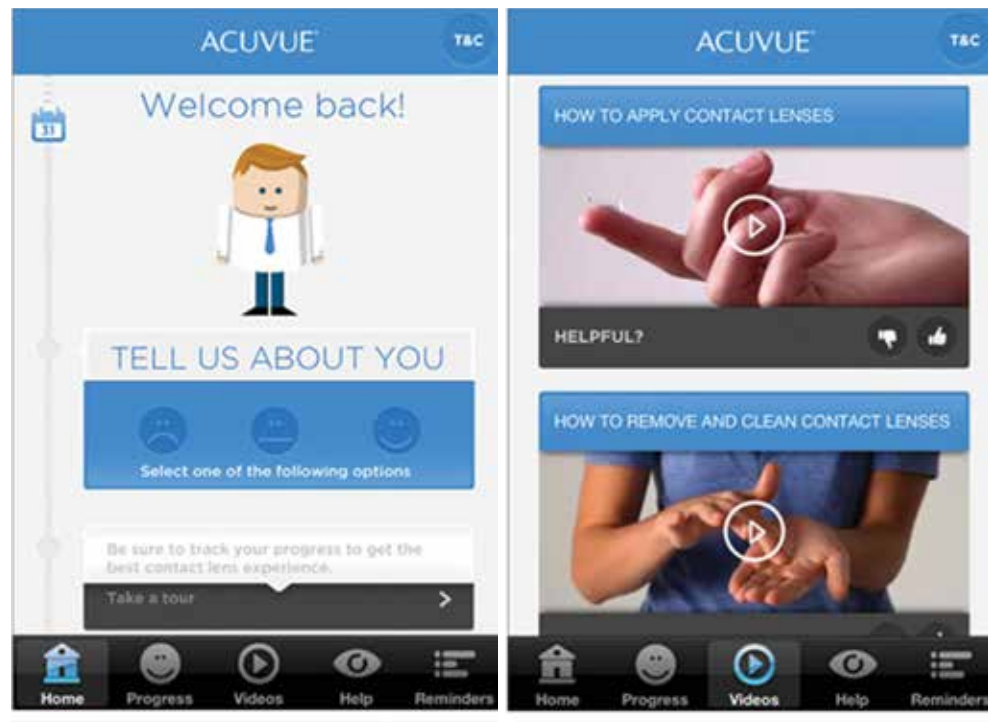


Figure 3 Screen shots from the LensPal app: a) Track daily progress using emoticons
b) Helpful application and removal videos

coefficient of friction is thought to have less impact on the eyelids. So when selecting a lens to deliver lasting comfort for good patient retention, properties such as oxygen transmission and water content are less important; consideration should be given to a lens with a low coefficient of friction as well as the modality and lens design.

Compliance

Compliance is a key issue for CL retention; non-compliance with care regimes is likely to put the patient at risk of complications and adverse events, while non-compliance with the replacement schedule may decrease comfort and vision quality.¹⁵ These are two key reasons for CL wear dropout. To help patients comply with replacement schedules, practitioners surveyed said they used email, phone, letter or calendar reminders.⁴ There are a multitude of tools and reminder systems becoming available, such as CL cases with in-built countdown timers, websites and apps with reminder functions. Practitioners must focus on changing behaviours with the greatest clinical impact. The provision of convenient, suitable tools and the use of every aftercare as an opportunity to reinforce good CL behaviour can help bring patients closer to full compliance.¹⁵

Technology and new tools

Getting used to CLs can take some time, but practitioners now have many tools available to support their patients with CL wear and care. While demonstrations and one-on-one time are considered most beneficial for teaching the patient in the beginning stages,⁴ written materials such as patient instruction guides and healthy lens wear cards (Figure 2) are excellent reminders for patients at home. Johnson & Johnson Vision Care recently released its Acuvue LensPal app which aims to help the patient through the first few months of wear (Figure 3). It tracks the patient's progress daily with 'emoticons' and provides personalised easy-to-follow tips and videos. The app also features reminders for when to remove lenses, clean them and visit the practitioner. Practitioners found the reminders and videos on the app particularly useful and thought tips could reassure new wearers and remind them when to return to their practitioner.

Retain CL patients for life

Practitioners are aware that patients often lapse from wear and some of the reasons why, but dropout figures show that there is still room for improvement in retaining CL patients. As practitioners, we need to be aware of CL retention in our own practices and understand lens and patient factors



that can overcome dropout issues. Use your support staff, the top 10 tips (Table 2) and all the available tools to help follow-up and support your patients. It has often been said that it is easier to keep a customer than find a new one and while keeping a CL patient may be a challenging process, the benefits are rewarding for the patient and the practice. ●

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- Ella Ewens is an optometrist and medical affairs manager for Johnson & Johnson Vision Care in the UK and Ireland

TABLE 2

Top 10 tips to consider when fitting contact lens patients in your practice

- Be aware the of CL retention rate at your practice, choose a meaningful measure and monitor it
- Listen to your patient's needs and lifestyle carefully and fit the best lens to suit their needs in the first instance
- Inform your patients that successful CL wear is a journey - adjustments may be needed along the way
- Take a thorough history - question the patient carefully to determine possible factors that may be linked to any discomfort
- Be aware of patients at a higher risk of dropout such as with dryness symptoms or who work in challenging environments - select CL material, modality and care products that help enhance comfort
- Follow up your CL patients - designating a staff member as a 'CL Buddy' can really help in the first few months of wear
- Train your support staff to help patients with CL application, removal and care
- Understand that CL handling is important - use a designated CL teaching area and utilise tools such as handouts, videos and apps to help
- Keep your patient up to date with the latest CL technology, and reassure them that they are wearing the best lens available for them
- Make lens care as easy as possible - give care products that are easy to use and give patients a simple checklist

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