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EYE FUNGUS REPORTS INCREASE AS CASES EMERGE IN UNITED STATES

**American Optometric Association Urges Americans To Take Proper
Contact Lens Precautions To Protect Against “Fusarium Keratitis”**

ST. LOUIS, MO – March 31, 2006 – Doctors of optometry from the American Optometric Association’s (AOA) Contact Lens and Cornea Section today urged contact lens wearers to take proper precautions amid reports of a potentially sight-threatening eye fungus appearing in the United States with increased frequency.

U.S. health officials are on alert after a recent outbreak of severe corneal infections associated with contact lens wearers in Asia began surfacing in America. The New York State Department of Health has issued an alert in collaboration with the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, acknowledging they are investigating three cases of Fusarium keratitis, a severe corneal fungal infection that recently has been linked to soft contact lens use. Optometrists in Florida and Iowa also have reported seeing similar cases in patients.

“This recent news is cause for concern, but not for alarm,” said Jack Schaeffer, O.D. and chair-elect of the Contact Lens and Cornea Section of the AOA. “We want our patients to be aware there is a problem out there and that the details are unfolding as we speak. We remain committed to protecting the eye health of Americans throughout this situation.”

Health officials have not yet determined whether the cases in the United States are directly related to outbreaks in Asia. Treatment for Fusarium keratitis includes anti-fungal medication. However, some patients have reportedly experienced a significant loss of vision, resulting in the need for a corneal transplant.

“We want to make sure Americans are taking the necessary precautions to protect themselves in this interim period as information becomes available,” said AOA President Richard L. Wallingford, O.D. “It is imperative that contact lens users practice safe handling of their contact lenses, are aware of any potential vision problems and alert their optometrist as they occur.”

Doctors of optometry urge anyone who experiences the following symptoms to contact their optometrist immediately:

- Sudden blurred or fuzzy vision
- Red and irritated eyes lasting for an unusually long period of time
- Pain in and around the eyes
- Increased sensitivity to light
- Excessive eye tearing

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More than 30 million Americans wear contact lenses, according to the Contact Lens Institute. More than 80 percent of contact lens wearers go to an optometrist for their eye care. According to the AOA, clean and safe handling of contact lenses is one of the most important measures Americans can take to protect their sight.

American Optometric Association's Top 6 Recommendations for Clean and Safe Contact Lenses

1. Always wash your hands before handling contact lenses.
2. Carefully and regularly clean contact lenses, as directed by your optometrist. If recommended, rub the contact lenses with fingers and rinse thoroughly before soaking lenses overnight in sufficient multi-purpose solution to completely cover the lens.
3. Store lenses in the proper lens storage case and replace the case every three months. Clean the case after each use, and keep it open and dry between cleanings.
4. Use only products recommended by your optometrist to clean and disinfect your lenses. Saline solution and rewetting drops are not designed to disinfect lenses.
5. Only fresh solution should be used to clean and store contact lenses. Never re-use old solution. Contact lens solution must be changed according to the manufacturer's recommendations, even if the lenses are not used daily.
6. Always replace old contacts when you get a new contact prescription.

When wearing or cleaning contacts:

- Do not use cream soaps to wash hands before cleaning contact lenses. Cream soaps can leave a film on the hands that can be transferred to the lenses.
- Never put contact lenses in the mouth or moisten them with saliva, which is full of bacteria and a potential source of infection.
- Don't use tap water or homemade saline solutions. Improper use of solutions has been linked to a potentially blinding condition among soft lens wearers.
- Never use contacts that have not been prescribed by an eye doctor. Contact lens wearing is not an option for everyone; consult with an optometrist to see if it's an appropriate option.

About the American Optometric Association (AOA):

The American Optometric Association represents more than 34,000 doctors of optometry, optometry students and paraoptometric assistants and technicians. Optometrists provide more than two-thirds of all primary eye care in the United States and serve patients in nearly 6,500 communities across the country. In 3,500 of those communities they are the only eye doctors.

American Optometric Association doctors of optometry are highly qualified, trained doctors on the frontline of eye and vision care who examine, diagnose, treat and manage diseases and disorders of the eye. In addition to providing eye and vision care, optometrists play a major role in a patient's overall health and well-being by detecting systemic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension.

Prior to optometry school, optometrists undergo three to four years of undergraduate study that typically culminates in a bachelor's degree with extensive, required coursework in areas such as advanced health, science and mathematics. Optometry school consists of four years of post-graduate, doctoral study concentrating on both the eye and systemic health. In addition to their formal training, doctors of optometry must undergo annual continuing education to stay current on the latest standards of care. For more information, visit www.aoa.org.