

This article appeared in the April 7th edition of the Toronto Star

Beware contact lens fungus

Apr. 7, 2006. 01:00 AM

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ASSOCIATED PRESS

ORLANDO, Fla — Alison Bregman-Rodriguez felt as if lightning had struck her right eye, or someone had pulled skin out of it. For almost a month she could not work, drive or watch television.

"I'd never felt so much pain," the 30-year-old said.

It was not until much later that the social worker finally learned she had a fungal eye infection, a hard-to-treat condition that can cause blindness. Some U.S. doctors report seeing many such infections in contact lens wearers.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is watching the situation and said it has received reports of about 50 possible cases in 12 states this year so far. But because tracking of the disease is spotty, the CDC cannot say for certain whether cases are on the rise.

Singapore health officials noticed a spike in January and discovered 39 cases involving contact lens users from 2005 to February of this year. Cases have also been reported in Malaysia and Hong Kong.

The fungus, called fusarium, is commonly found in plant material and soil in tropical and subtropical areas. Without eye drop treatment, which can last two to three months, the infection can scar the cornea causing blindness. Symptoms can include blurry vision, pain or redness, increased sensitivity to light and excessive discharge from the eye. It is not contagious.

"The question is why all of the sudden contact lens users were targeted by this organism, whereas before they have not been," said Dr. Eduardo Alfonso, medical director of the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute. Alfonso said the only common denominators are that most patients wore contacts and lived in a warm place where the fungus grew abundantly.

Alfonso said contact lens wearers should wash their hands with soap and dry them with a lint-free towel before handling their lenses or touching their eyes. Lens storage cases should be replaced every three months and the solution should be changed daily, he said.

The doctor said the fungus is tricky to detect because diagnosis requires a lab culture not all doctors are prepared to take or read. And the fungus can be so slow-growing that it takes weeks for the culture to come back.

Further, the medicine used to treat fungal infections is not widely stocked by pharmacies and often must be ordered.