

Tip Sheet

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Haunting Costumes Can Make Halloween More Trick Than Treat *Texas Tech Physicians Give Safety Tips for Aspiring Monsters and Superheroes*

In a poll conducted by Twitter, only 27% of Americans consider Halloween to be a holiday while 44% believe it to be a day of celebration. No matter how it's designated, Halloween represents to many the essence of autumn: a time when our love of colored leaves, cooler weather and all things pumpkin-spiced reaches its zenith.

Halloween also provides families and children an evening of entertainment highlighted by candy, carnivals and costumes. And like most activities, there are certain steps parents can take to help their little ghosts and goblins — and themselves — experience a safe evening.

In a so-called normal year, these steps often include picking out costumes that have reflective elements, organizing group trick-or-treating and accompanying children as they go door-to-door in search of sweet treats. Though these precautions still apply, experts from Texas Tech Physicians offered additional safeguards that can help people enjoy the revelry while still respecting the pandemic that has elbowed its way into nearly every aspect of life in 2020.

Makeup for Success

Those who truly get into the Halloween spirit know that thinking outside the big-box store costume can provide more boo for the buck. A bit of well-placed makeup can lend reality to one's appearance, and colored hair or a wig can take the entire look over the top. However, Michelle Tarbox, M.D., a dermatologist for Texas Tech Physicians, said enjoying a comfortable, colorful and creepy Halloween experience means thinking carefully about the types of products one uses to enhance their costume. "Sometimes people get a little caught up in the festive atmosphere and they take risks with their skin they might not take otherwise," Tarbox said. To avoid products that could damage the skin, she provided some tips:

- Choose a product specifically intended for skin use. While using markers, acrylic paints or spray paints on the face or body can be tempting, remember that those products aren't intended for skin and can cause adverse reactions ranging from allergies to burns.
- Don't skimp on price or quality when it comes to makeup, especially if you have sensitive skin. Rather than purchasing inexpensive products, consider using theatrical-style makeup that is formulated for people with skin sensitivity issues. Forego makeup and paints that are alcohol- or oil-based and select water-based pigment options that have been tested for skin sensitivity and are free of fragrances or harsh preservatives. Tarbox recommends using products from Snazaroo, Blue Squid Pro Palette, TAG Body Art, Mehron or Ben Nye theatrical pigments. "All of those can be used very safely, even with patients with sensitive skin," she added.

- Use new makeup. Tarbox said makeup left over from last year's Halloween costume has sitting unused for a year, and unless precautions were taken to store it, the makeup has almost certainly accumulated bacterial growth. Also, do not share makeup or applicators like sponges or cotton swabs. "I love to recycle, but not when your faces' health is on the line," Tarbox said.
- Apply makeup that is intended for the body part to which it will be applied. Certain body paints are only appropriate for the body and some face paints are only appropriate for the face (but not the eyes).
- If using a temporary hair pigment, clip-on extensions or a full wig, remember that the scalp is still skin, so use only products designed to be used on this often sensitive area. If the wig will be glued in place, it's important to use glues or adhesives such as spirit gum that are made for skin. Avoid industrial or household adhesives such as epoxies, Super Glue, Krazy Glue and Elmer's glue products as they can cause significant skin irritation and damage. Tarbox also recommended avoiding second-hand wigs or costume-shop wigs that may have been tried on by multiple shoppers. "Get a wig that's sealed off in the package," Tarbox suggested. "Sometimes people have hitchhikers on their scalp and you don't want to pick those up from a hastily selected wig."

The Eyes, Always the Eyes

As they have for years, masks and decorative eye contacts are often part of the sensory overload that defines Halloween. Whether the focal point of a costume or just an accent used to create a more frightening look, masks and colored faux contact lenses can be risky and leave trick-or-treaters with impaired vision long after the last candy bar has been mauled. Kelly Mitchell, an ophthalmologist at Texas Tech Physicians, said there are some safety tips to follow to help prevent spooky eye injuries:

- Mitchell advises against using over-the-counter colored contact lenses purchased from costume shops. As medical devices, contacts should only be prescribed by an optometrist, an ophthalmologist or another physician skilled at prescribing contact lenses. And because contact lenses are placed directly atop the eye surface, they should be custom fit to everybody's eye individually. "Even between the two eyes of the same person, their contact lenses may actually have a different fit," Mitchell said.
- Before placing the lenses, the hands should be washed thoroughly to prevent contamination or damage to the eye. Mitchell also suggests using the most delicate part of the pinky finger to gently rub the inside of each lens. If anything sharp or rough is detected, do not place that lens on the eye. "They're not made by a medical company that has FDA approval to make contact lenses in a safe and sterile way," Mitchell emphasized. "They're basically taking small pieces of plastic and making them look like contact lenses, so the inside of them could basically be rough plastic." Placing these objects on the eye could cause conjunctivitis (pink eye). It also could lead to a more serious infection in the white part of the eye or damage the cornea, which sits directly atop the colored part of the eye known as the iris. "If (the cornea) were to get roughed up or have an abrasion and get an infection, that could really leave a person with a permanent and severe loss of vision," Mitchell said.
- Whether purchasing a mask or faux eyes, it's important to make sure the person's field of vision is not diminished. If the opening one is meant to see through is so small that it restricts the field of view, one risks colliding into or tripping over something while they walk. Mitchell said driving while donning a mask or fake contacts that alter one's ability to see creates an especially dangerous situation.

- Some costume contact lenses have a slit opening to resemble a cat's eye or some other type of custom opening that it makes it very hard for the person to see. Therefore, if one does decide to use faux colored contacts, the pupillary opening in the lenses should be big enough that the user's vision is not compromised.
- Whether a mask is strapped to the face or pulled over the head, it should fit the wearer's face properly so as not to constrict the field of vision. If a mask is too loose, the upper part could sag inward and strike a part of the eye and cause an injury. If the mask is too tight, it could cause an injury by compressing on the eye. In addition, Mitchell said the opening one is meant to see through should be large enough to prevent one's field of vision from being restricted.

Leave the Pandemic; Take the Candy

To say COVID-19 has many parents feeling spooked this Halloween would likely be an epic understatement. However, Richard Lampe, M.D., an infectious disease physician at Texas Tech Physicians, believes it is still safe to have a spine-tingling experience while minimizing the real-life fear brought on by the virus. "Think of things that you can do at home. Develop some new ideas for Halloween, but don't let COVID-19 define it; you define your ways to conquer COVID-19 by developing some new ideas," Lampe said. He suggested creating a safe and fun Halloween by incorporating some of the same precautions that have become synonymous with the pandemic:

- The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests organizing a virtual Halloween party where people, especially children, can decorate the house, show off their costumes and play games with their friends on a screen while remaining at home.
- Stage outdoor activities like pumpkin decorating contests. Lampe believes traditional activities like hayrides and pumpkin patches that typically take place outdoors also are relatively safe as long as people observe COVID-19 guidelines and wear a face covering, wash their hands frequently and practice socially distancing.
- If parents want to take their children trick-or-treating, Lampe suggests doing so in small groups. Also keep in mind that the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has said wearing a costume mask is not adequate protection against COVID-19. Children can wear a Halloween mask or use face paint as part of their costume, and adults can do the same, but they also should wear a protective mask that reduces the chances of spreading the virus.
- Those staying home to hand out candy can place the candy in small bundles that can be picked up without contact or they can spend the evening outside handing out treats in person, again observing the COVID-19 guidelines.
- If Halloween isn't complete without a carnival or haunted house, Lampe said those activities should be held outside if possible. Because of the unique circumstances presented by the pandemic, Lampe suggested an outdoor haunted experience or carnival would be a great way to celebrate as long as people remember to socially distance, wear a face covering and wash their hands frequently. "I don't think you can wash your hands enough," he added.