

SOAKING SOFT CONTACT LENSES ON SHABBOS

by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt

A discussion of Halachic topics related to the Parsha of the week. For final rulings, consult your Rav.

QUESTION:

Is it permitted to soak soft contact lenses in a disinfecting solution or in a saline solution on Shabbos?

DISCUSSION:

Recently⁽¹⁾, contemporary poskim were asked whether soaking soft contact lenses on Shabbos violates the forbidden Labor of Laundering. In order to better understand the problem, we must first consider the following technical information:

Soft lenses are produced from a type of plastic called polymer. During the manufacturing process, the dry plastic lens is soaked in a liquid for several hours, completely altering its shape.

Manufacturers instruct soft lenses wearers to soak their lenses each night in a disinfecting solution⁽²⁾ for two reasons: 1) To rid them of dirt or tears which contain microscopic germs that are absorbed into the lenses. Tears also produce certain proteins which build up on the lenses and cloud them if they are not cleaned on a regular basis. 2) To keep the lens soft and pliable. For this purpose, however, the lenses need only be soaked in a saline solution⁽³⁾, not in a disinfecting solution.

In addition, the instructions call for gently rubbing the lenses after removing them from the soaking solution in order to remove any dirt which may collect on the surface of the lenses. Halachic background

Laundering, one of the thirty-nine forbidden Shabbos Labors, is defined as removing dirt that is either completely or partially absorbed in a fabric. There are three stages to the laundering process, each of which is prohibited: soaking [or spraying], scrubbing and wringing. The laundering phase that applies to our case of cleaning soft lenses is "soaking". There are three points regarding "soaking" which are pertinent to our discussion:

Soaking a dirty garment in water is the first stage of Laundering and is Biblically forbidden on

Shabbos. But only absorbent materials are included in this prohibition. Thus leather may be soaked in water, since leather - no matter how soft - is nonabsorbent(4). Similarly, other soft non-porous materials such as soft plastic, rubber, nylon or any other synthetics which do not absorb are permitted to be soaked in water(5). Contemporary poskim rule, however, that even non-absorbent materials may not be soaked in a cleaning solution. Even though the item does not become "soaked," it is nevertheless being "laundered," since a cleaning solution will remove [all or part of] a stain(6).

The Rishonim disagree whether or not it is permitted to soak a clean garment in water if one does not intend to clean it. While the majority of the poskim are lenient, Mishnah Berurah recommends that one follow the more stringent opinions and refrain from doing so(7).

THE ISSUE

The question posed to contemporary poskim was this: How do we classify soft contact lenses - are they similar to an absorbent garment or are they more similar to a non-absorbent soft material [e.g., soft leather]? On one hand, soft lenses are made of plastic, which usually is non-porous. But as described earlier, lenses definitely do absorb liquids(8), making them very similar to a garment. If lenses are classified as a soft material, then it would be permitted to soak them in water [to keep them soft and pliable] but not in a disinfecting solution [to clean them]. If lenses are classified as a garment, then it would be prohibited to soak them in water as well(9).

An additional issue concerns the gentle rubbing of the lenses when removing them from the solution. It is questionable whether or not this is considered actual "laundering," since this action removes proteins and other dirt which are absorbed into the lenses.

THE RULING

Contemporary poskim debate this and other issues concerning soft lenses(10). They are in agreement that they may not be soaked in a disinfecting solution, as this constitutes Laundering(11). They are, however, undecided whether or not soft lenses should be classified as a garment or as soft leather. Thus they only allow soaking soft lenses in a saline solution if they have already been cleaned and they are soaking only to prevent them from hardening(12). The poskim recommend the following procedure:

1. Do not rub soft lenses clean on Shabbos.
2. Before Shabbos, the lenses should be cleaned well, using disinfecting solution and gently rubbing them with one's fingers.
3. On Shabbos, the lenses may be soaked in saline solution [so that the lenses do not harden] but not in disinfecting solution.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 This discussion is based on the halachic and scientific material presented in the prestigious Torah Journal Yeshurun, vol. 7, pg. 526-538 by Harav Y.M. Rubin. The halachic decisions are those of Harav Y.S Elyashiv, Harav S. Vosner and Harav N. Karelitz.
- 2 Such as Alcon Opti-Free Express Multi-purpose Disinfecting Solution.
- 3 Which is mostly water.
- 4 O.C. 302:9.
- 5 Igros Moshe Y.D. 2:76; Tzitz Eliezer 5:10; Shemiras Shabbos K'hilchasah 15:5-6.
- 6 Oral ruling by Harav Y.S. Elyashiv, Harav S. Vosner and Harav N. Karelitz, quoted in Yeshurun, pg. 530.
- 7 302:48 and Beiur Halachah (s.v. sheyiesh).
- 8 Some brands may contain up to 70% liquid.
- 9 See Shemiras Shabbos K'hilchasah 15:82 who permits soaking soft contact lenses in liquid so that they do not get brittle. In note 251 he explains that no prohibition of m'abed, tanning [processing], is transgressed. He does not address the issue of soaking. In an oral statement, Harav Neuwirth reports that Harav S.Z. Auerbach was not concerned with the soaking issue "since lenses only swell and puff up from the water; they do not actually absorb water as do threads in a garment". It is very likely that Harav Auerbach's decision was based on erroneous or incomplete technical information, which is why this question was re-submitted to poskim at the present time; Yeshurun, pg. 530.
- 10 Hard lenses do not present an halachic problem since they do not absorb liquids. Cleaning and soaking them is similar to cleaning and soaking dishes which is clearly permitted.
- 11 Although it can be argued that "laundering" should not apply at all to contact lenses since the dirt is not visible to the naked eye, still the poskim feel that this argument is not strong enough to permit cleaning lenses. They explain that the sensitivity of lenses is such that even small particles are significant enough to be considered real dirt, since any build up of dirt or proteins will cloud the lenses; Yeshurun, pg. 528.
- 12 This is based on the views that permit soaking a clean garment when there is no intent to clean it, as described earlier in point 3. Although Mishnah Berurah recommends that one be stringent and not soak even clean garments, in our case we may be lenient since soft lenses may be classified as "soft leather" and not as a "garment"; Yeshurun, ibid.

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