

Headline: Eyewear consumers blast effort to cease online sales

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A court battle pitting Ontario's optometrists and opticians against online corrective lens retailers has consumers caught in the crossfire.

In January an Ontario judge issued an injunction forbidding retailers from selling prescription eyewear unless it's dispensed by an optometrist, optician, or physician licensed to practise in the province. That would effectively ban the online sale of corrective lenses.

The injunction has been stayed pending an appeal which is scheduled to begin May 17.

The situation has sparked some consumer backlash including an online petition, organized by a group called Canadians for Eyewear Choice.

The petition, which by Thursday had collected more than 2,400 signatures, calls on the provincial government to introduce legislation that will allow the continuing online sale of glasses and contacts without costly regulatory oversight.

'Just ridiculous'

Michael Barton, an Ottawa-based consultant and father of two children, worries about what might happen to the cost of eyewear in the province if the order against online retailers is upheld.

"The idea that I can't buy something online these days is just ridiculous, frankly," Barton said. "The idea that an injunction would be put in place, in 2018, to disallow someone to buy something as simple as a disposable contact lens is kind of over the top."

Barton's children are involved in competitive sports and go through a lot of eyewear, he said.

"There's a convenience factor. We're always going in different directions, and to hop online and order your monthly contacts, it's a lot easier for me than to go down to an optometrist or optician."

But the province's optometrists and opticians see it differently.

Online sellers breaking law, colleges say

In a joint news release, the College of Optometrists of Ontario and the College of Opticians of Ontario said "the dispensing of corrective lenses is a controlled act, subject to Ontario legislation, that definitively requires a regulated health professional's involvement. Mail order over the internet without the involvement of an optometrist or optician is inconsistent with legislation."

According to the Canadian Association of Optometrists' website, there are risks associated with ordering eyeglasses and contacts online, specifically:

- Some sites do not verify the prescription, an oversight that could result in customers wearing optically incorrect or improperly fitting lenses.
- Many online sites sell products that have not been approved by Health Canada, and have not undergone safety tests.
- Lenses from overseas may be exposed to dramatic temperature changes in uncontrolled warehouses or transportation vessels, potentially affecting their integrity and leading to eye health issues.
- Without controls to ensure internet sites source lenses directly from the manufacturer, overseas distribution channels may include counterfeit products.
- Replacement and exchange privileges may not be available with an online vendor.

According to Canadians for Eyewear Choice, however, people have been ordering eyewear online for close to two decades without any significant health or safety issues.

Neither the Ontario Association of Optometrists nor the Canadian Association of Optometrists would comment on the issue, which is before the courts.

The College of Optometrists of Ontario, which filed the legal action, was not able to provide a spokesperson in time to meet CBC's deadline.