

## Eyes are the windows to the soul...and to the body!

### What is an optometrist?



THE COLLEGE  
OF OPTOMETRISTS

Our eyes may traditionally be known as windows to the soul, but for optometrists they are also the windows to other parts of the body. Eyes are second only to the brain as the body's most complex organs, and are made up of more than two million working parts; they are also the only transparent parts of the body, and one of the few ways of seeing into it without cutting it open.

A recent survey conducted by The College of Optometrists shows that only 17% of people asked know what an 'optometrist' is, and over 1 in 10 people have never had their eyes tested. Of those that had been to see an optometrist, satisfaction levels were high, with 93% satisfied or very satisfied with the service.

An optometrist (based on the Greek 'Optos' - to see, and 'Metria' - to measure) is able to monitor any change in your eyes, and check that they are functioning as well as they can; giving advice on visual problems, prescribing and dispensing glasses or contact lenses, and recommending other treatments or visual aids where appropriate. You'll find an optometrist at opticians practices on the high-street, and should visit them as part of your regular health routine.

Optometrists are highly trained, postgraduate professionals who are regulated by the General Optical Council and have to adhere to the GOC's Code of Conduct. Optometrists who are members or fellows of the College of Optometrists sign up to the College's more detailed Code of Ethics and Guidance and Professional Conduct. Like all clinicians, optometrists rely on their own professional judgement, taking each patient on a case-by-case basis and carrying out whatever tests are necessary to determine their patients' need for vision care. For this reason, there cannot be a "one size fits all" approach to the eye examination. An eye examination should normally take between 20 and 30 minutes - and will normally include a range of tests, such as visual acuity (where the optometrist will see how far you can read down the letter chart), retinoscopy (where the optometrist checks what prescription you need for spectacles by shining a light into your eyes), and a cover test (where the optometrist checks whether your eyes are working together by alternately covering each eye). Your optometrist will also ask you for your family history, age and general health background.

However, an optometrist isn't just able to spot things that are wrong with your eyes, such as cataracts and vision deficiencies that you may not be aware of. Because the eyes are transparent, they can sometimes reveal problems that aren't eye-related. For example, by looking at the changes in the blood vessels at the back of your eyes your optometrist may be able to spot diabetes or high blood pressure; by looking at your visual field your optometrist may be able to spot a brain tumour; and by looking at the appearance of the nerve at the back of your eye which enables you to see your optometrist may be able to spot raised pressure within your head.

Dr Susan Blakeney, Optometric Adviser to the College of Optometrists, says: ‘The eyes are one of the most amazing parts of the body: they can process 36,000 bits of information every hour, and in a normal life span the eye will generate almost 24 million images of the world around us.

‘People often underestimate how important it is to look after their eyes, but we only get one pair: making sure you visit an optometrist can protect the health of your eyes, and of your body, for years to come.’

**Conditions an optometrist *may* be able to spot include:**

### **Diabetes**

An optometrist may be able to see the changes caused by diabetes at the back of your eye.

### **Brain Tumours**

Brain tumours can create blind spots that may be spotted in a visual field test, and pressure within the head may cause a swelling at the back of the eye that could be visible to the optometrist.

### **High Blood Pressure**

This can cause changes to the blood vessels at the back of your eye, which an optometrist may be able to spot when he or she examines the inside of your eye.

### **Pregnancy**

Pregnancy may lead to raised blood pressure or to diabetes and your optometrist may sometimes be able to spot these changes.

### **“Floaters”**

Caused by dead cells and debris in the eye, and normally harmless: however, sudden onset of many floaters may be the sign of a retinal tear, which can lead to sudden loss of vision if not treated.

An optometrist will examine your eyes to ensure they are healthy and may also be able to spot signs of other eye diseases such as:

- **Glaucoma**
- **Cataracts**
- **Macular Degeneration**

Your eye examination may include some of the following tests:

### **Visual Acuity**

Measures your ability to see detail using a chart featuring letters of the alphabet. There are alternative charts available for people who are unable to identify letters (e.g. young children).

**Retinoscopy**

This checks for any spectacle prescription you need by shining a light into your eyes and seeing how it reflects off the back of your eye.

**Subjective Refraction**

This refines the result found during retinoscopy to determine your optimum prescription for spectacles or contact lenses.

**Reading Addition**

This is the additional power that you may need for reading when you reach middle age.

**Cover Test**

This checks whether your eyes are working together by alternately covering up either eye.

**Motility**

This checks that your eye muscles are working correctly by asking you to follow a target with your eyes.

**Ophthalmoscopy**

This is where the optometrist examines the back of your eye to look for signs of eye disease such as glaucoma. It may also show up signs of increased blood pressure and diabetes. It will be done using a torch-like light, or using a bright light and a lens held in front of your eye. Some optometrists may also take a photograph of the back of your eyes.

**Tonometry**

Tonometry is one of the tests for glaucoma. There are several different ways to check: one method involves puffing air into your eye and measuring the pressure.

**Visual Field**

This checks to ensure you see all the way around, by asking you to look at a central spot and indicating when you see a faint light around the outside of your peripheral vision.