

GLASSES

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SHOPPING STRATEGY

Begin with a thorough eye exam by an ophthalmologist or optometrist, then shop for lenses and frames. Don't just buy special lens coatings because they sound like a good idea: you may not need them or they may be standard. However, scratch-resistant, ultraviolet light blocking, and anti-reflective coatings may have specific benefits for many people.

Know the choices. Your prescription will dictate whether you need single-vision lenses or bifocals. In bifocals, you can choose regular (lined) or "progressive" (no-line) lenses. Frame styles abound, but not every style works with every lens prescription. Lens materials include plastic, glass, impact-resistant polycarbonate and ultrathin "high index" plastic.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Most consumers report the best experiences with independent eye doctors, whose services outperformed many of the larger chains and did slightly better than smaller stores and chains overall. You should certainly consider using an independent eye doctor for all routine examinations, but especially if your prescription is complicated and the glasses require extensive fitting. Chains and smaller stores do have merit, though. Chains may be less expensive. Small and large stores have flexible and, often, late hours. If you need glasses immediately, some chains can make them in a day or less. You usually pay a premium for the one-hour type of service.

Although lens coatings may be oversold, some are worth considering. Ask for scratch resistance protection if you're rough on glasses. Get lenses with ultraviolet filtering if you spend lots of time outdoors in bright light. An anti-reflective coating offers glare protection with night driving.

Be clear on the warranty for both your frames and your lenses. Some stores may charge a co-payment to replace or repair glasses during the first year. If you buy scratch protection for lenses; again, clarify your warranty. If you buy glasses with some credit cards, you may be covered for 90 days against breakage, theft or even loss. Check with the card company.

When your new glasses arrive, don't leave the shop unless they feel right physically and optically, and don't hesitate to return later if problems arise. The glasses should sit properly on your face and should not distort your world. However, some lens materials, such as the damage-resistant polycarbonate lens, may be made perfectly and still cause peripheral distortion in 30% of individuals. Don't throw out your old glasses. Optical stores collect them for organizations that refurbish and distribute glasses to the needy.



FITTING GLASSES

Lens Types - The kind of glasses you need (glass, regular plastic, thin “high index” or impact-resistant polycarbonate) should depend on the strength of your prescription and how you will use the glasses. Polycarbonates, for instance, are highly recommended for children and athletes, while a scratch-resistant coating for plastic lenses or glass is recommended for people who are not very careful in cleaning lenses.

Hinges - Spring hinges are still popular because they help hold frame adjustments. However, the newer rigid frames (e.g., titanium) can be very lightweight without spring hinges and still hold adjustments.

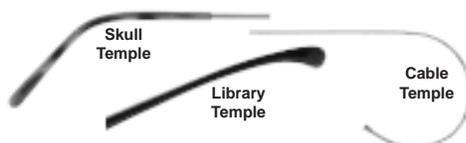


Bridges - They distribute 90% of the glasses' weight on the nose. There are three kinds. The Saddle type is good for heavier glasses and is molded into the frame, spreading weight along the sides and top of the nose. The Keyhole type keeps weight to the sides, eliminating pressure at the top, and may also position the frame higher to keep it from resting on your cheeks. Adjustable nose pads offer the greatest flexibility and comfort for fitting problems. Silicon pads can be used for a better grip, stopping slippage, although they are harder to keep clean.



Eye Shape - Big glasses can catch glare and distort vision and are harder to center optically. In higher powers, the lenses are also heavier and thicker. If you need high power lenses, consider the smallest frames practical.

Temples - These should not pinch or be positioned to obstruct peripheral vision. There are three types. **Skull** temples, the most common, bend over and rest on top of the ears. Coiled-metal comfort **cables** hook behind the ears and hold glasses securely in place (important for strong prescriptions, where position is crucial, and for active people). **Library** temples go straight back and hold glasses by pressure. Proper design makes glasses easy to slip on and off.



Thick and Thin / Bulging and Fat - High index plastic lenses (on the left, above) are lighter and thinner than conventional plastics in the same prescription. Aspheric lenses (again, on the left, above) are ground with complex and flatter curves for less distortion through the lens.

FRAMES AND LENSES

Locally, the average pair of glasses sells for \$225, according to industry figures, but it's common to spend more. Of course, that average includes single vision glasses, sunglasses, regular bifocals, and progressive addition bifocals. A beautiful designer titanium frame (the extremely flexible frame you saw advertised on television), the thinnest progressive bifocal lenses that reduce the peripheral distortion of your vision, and the special protective lens coatings that can make your glasses-wearing experience more comfortable, can raise the price to \$500. And it will be worth it to you if your visual comfort, the complexity of your prescription, and your facial features benefit from these custom glasses.

THE LITTLE PARTS OF GLASSES THAT MATTER

Frames - Although unisex metal frames (in small, stylish, oval eyeshapes) are popular, separate men's and women's lines are also staging a comeback. Men's styles are more geometric, with well-defined angles and squared-off bottoms. Women's frames feature ovals and upswept corners in a wide choice of colors. The most popular frames are now both stylish and made from the newer more durable metallics such as titanium.

Frame aesthetics - A frame should cover no more than 20% to 30% of your face and the top of the frame should follow the line of your eyebrows. The frame's shape and structure should balance prominent facial characteristics. For instance, a long nose can appear "shortened" by a frame with a low bridge, and a high forehead can be softened if a frame's temples are mid-height or lower.

Lens Coatings - Scratch protection (\$15 to \$20 extra) reduces the likelihood of scratches on plastic, but you'll still have to be careful. Polycarbonate lenses require an anti-scratch coating because they are less hard than standard lenses. UV protection (\$15 to \$30) filters virtually all ultraviolet light. It's important for people who spend lots of time outdoors in strong sunlight. Tints (\$10 to \$35) are not purely cosmetic. They can reduce exposure to light without really being a sunglasses level of tinting. Anti-reflective coating (\$40 to \$70, or more) cuts glare, especially on strong prescriptions and is required on aspheric lenses.

Two special designs - Unlike regular lined bifocals, progressive addition ("no-line") bifocal lenses (\$100 and up, quality starts at \$200) gradually change power from the top of the bifocal to the bottom of the lens. If you have a strong prescription, aspheric lenses (\$100 and up) reduce your peripheral distortion and the distorted view of your eyes seen by someone else.

LENSES: HOW ELABORATE?

The right way to buy glasses is to start with your prescription, not the frame, says Michelle Wilson, the certified optician who provides quality service at our own Certified Optics. Unfortunately, she says, most stores "turn consumers loose at the frame display until they salivate, then put the lenses into whatever frame the patient wants." That sales tactic often leads to mismatched lenses and frames. Some lenses are too thick for the small, oval wire frames that are fashionable today. Some frames are too shallow for a progressive no-line bifocal, which demands almost an inch from the center down. Fortunately, there are some special techniques that Michelle can use to fit a progressive no-line bifocal into many of the small designer frames.

GETTING FITTED FOR FRAMES

If you're lucky, the person behind the counter helping you choose a frame will be a licensed and experienced optician, schooled in the optics of lenses and vision and in the making and fitting of eyeglasses. Most private optical shops have certified opticians to provide better measurements, styling, and adjustments. But in more than half the states, opticians don't have to be licensed. And in some stores, the person doing the selling may be a frame "stylist," someone who can talk only about how you look in glasses. Nancy Kirsch, chief optician at the State University of New York's College of Optometry, in New York City, says "a person who stands around and says you look good might as well be selling jeans."

When you go from trying on glasses for style to having them fitted, don't hesitate to ask about the person's training, licensing and other accreditation. Also examine the frames: Make sure they have sturdy hinges, and that the temples don't pinch you or obstruct your peripheral vision. Adjustable nose pads offer the most flexibility and comfort.

WHERE TO GO FOR EYE EXAMS, NEW GLASSES

Where to go. You can have your eyes examined and shop for glasses at ophthalmologists' or optometrists' offices, posh optical boutiques, the independent optician in a local store, or an outpost of a large chain like LensCrafters or Pearle, which provides eye exams (usually by an optometrist) and new glasses.

Whom to see. Here are the differences among the eye-care professions:

- Opticians are technicians who make and fit eyeglasses. They aren't allowed to issue prescriptions or diagnose eye disease. Fewer than half the states license opticians. A state license or certification by the American Board of Opticianry can indicate appropriate training, but isn't necessarily a guarantee of competence.
- Ophthalmologists (M.D.) are medical doctors who have completed college, medical school, an internship, and several years of residency studying, diagnosing and treating eye disease. Unlike optometrists, they can perform eye surgery. Most ophthalmologists now devote a major portion of their practice to general ophthalmology so that they can better serve their patients needs for regular eye examinations and glasses and contacts.
- Optometrists have earned a doctor of optometry (O.D.) in addition to a bachelor's degree. They examine eyes, diagnose eye disease, and prescribe eyeglasses and contacts. States' limits on their practice vary, but they've generally been loosened. For example, many states let optometrists prescribe drugs to treat eye disease.

What to ask for. More patients had their eyes checked by an optometrist than by an ophthalmologist, but both professionals can do a thorough exam, although all ophthalmologists not only can examine for glasses and contacts, but are specifically trained to diagnose and treat eye disorders. The American Academy of Ophthalmology recommends a preschool eye exam for children before the age of five. Adults under 40 with no eye problems can probably go every three years. But diabetics should have an annual exam, and people at high risk for glaucoma should be examined at least every one to two years. After age 40, a routine examination should be every two years.

Glasses for sports. More than 100,000 sports-related eye injuries occur each year. Many are caused, not only when lenses shatter, but when "dress" frames snap. Sports goggles offer the best protection: they avoid bridges, hinges, and side pieces, which can easily break on impact. The lenses are usually impact-resistant polycarbonate.



EYE DOCTORS VS. OPTICAL STORES

Overall, glasses bought directly from ophthalmologists or optometrists were slightly more trouble-free and slightly higher in quality than those from independent stores or chains. The doctors' selection of lenses and frames was judged comparable with that of other stores and the big chains.

Optical chains and smaller stores outscored doctors for convenient locations and store hours. Those with an in-store lab can make most glasses far more quickly than doctors or stores that use an independent lab. By buying in a store, you can separate your eye exam from the place where you buy the glasses. That lets you take the spectacles to the doctor for an independent check if something seems wrong. However, many patients prefer to have their glasses made in the office where their examination was performed so that they can feel confident that the physician is in complete control of all aspects of the examination and the glasses.

PROBLEM GLASSES

Ideally, glasses should be made and fitted properly the first time around. Still, if you do encounter problems, they should be correctable. If you tell the optician about the problems right away (or within a month of purchase), you should be able to have the glasses corrected or replaced.