
Eye Health: Optometrist vs. Ophthalmologist

As a person with diabetes, it's important to have a complete dilated eye exam at least once a year from an optometrist or ophthalmologist, also known as eye doctors.

Let's take a look at the different types of eye health specialists and what they do.

Types of Eye Health Specialists

Optometrist: An optometrist is an eye health specialist who specializes in examining, diagnosing, and managing eye-related disorders. They are experts in determining the best prescription to optimize your vision. It is crucial to see an eye health specialist for a thorough eye exam once diagnosed with diabetes.

People with diabetes should see an optometrist at least once a year for a complete dilated eye exam to detect the earliest stages of any diabetes-related eye complications and prevent them from worsening. If your optometrist diagnoses a diabetes-related ocular complication, they may refer to you to retinal specialist for additional evaluation.

Ophthalmologist: Ophthalmologists are medical or osteopathic doctors who are licensed to provide medical and surgical eye care. If diagnosed with diabetes, you may decide to see a general ophthalmologist at least once a year for a complete dilated eye examination. If your general ophthalmologist notes an abnormality on your eye exam, they may refer you to a retinal specialist for future evaluation.

Retinal specialists specialize in the treatment of diabetic retinal disease. Diabetic retinal disease is very serious and can lead to permanent vision loss or blindness if not diagnosed and treated in a timely matter. Depending on the extent of the disease, a retinal specialist may perform LASER treatment, intraocular injections, or ocular surgery.

Optician: Another member of the eye health team may be an optician. An optician makes and adjusts glasses, eyeglass lenses, and contact lenses based on your prescription. Your annual eye exam with your optometrist might identify changes in your vision which mean a new prescription for eye wear or changes in your existing prescription to maximize your vision on the eye chart and in the real world.

How Do I Choose?

The importance of a complete dilated eye exam for those with diabetes cannot be overstated. Your primary care provider or endocrinologist can refer you to the right eye health specialist to fit your needs. You can also conduct an internet search or ask family and friends for recommendations.

Your insurance carrier will also be able to let you know what eye care providers and services are covered.



Why Do I Need an Eye Doctor?

Unfortunately, people living with diabetes are at a higher risk for vision complications. Diabetic eye disease is extremely serious and can lead to blindness if not diagnosed and treated in a timely manner. During an eye exam, the eye doctor can diagnose eye-related disease even before you have symptoms. The sooner you catch any of these complications, the sooner you can treat them and prevent them from getting worse.

Diabetes and Eye Health

People living with diabetes are at a higher risk for vision complications. The most common diabetes-related eye conditions are:

- **Diabetic retinopathy:** A complication of diabetes that causes swelling, leakage, and bleeding in the blood vessels of the retina and is the most common cause of irreversible blindness in Americans.
- **Cataracts:** Cloudiness in the lens of your eye that can cause vision loss.
- **Glaucoma:** Increased fluid pressure in your eyes that can cause vision loss and blindness if not treated.
- **Dry eye:** Blurred vision, excessive watering, stinging, and burning in the eyes.

Facts About Diabetes and Eye Health

- Approximately 30% of people with diabetes worldwide have signs of **retinopathy**, and one-third of them have vision-threatening retinopathy, which is defined as severe non-proliferative diabetic retinopathy, proliferative diabetic retinopathy, or center-involved diabetic macular edema.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 4.1 million people with diabetes in the U.S. have retinopathy, and **11.7% reported vision disability**, including blindness in 2020.
- People with diabetes are two times more likely to develop **cataracts**—and at a younger age.
- Diabetes is associated with a significantly increased **risk of glaucoma**.
- Between 4.3 and 7% of people with diabetes may have **macular edema**.
- Studies have indicated 54% prevalence of **dry eye syndrome** in people with diabetes.



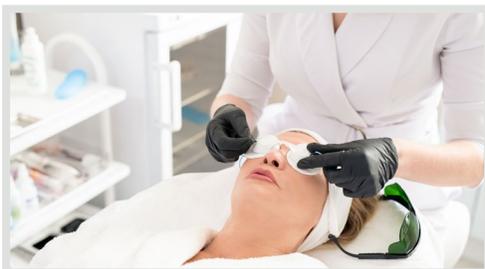
But there is good news! An annual routine eye exam could prevent 95% of vision loss caused by diabetes. And maintaining an A1C of less than 7 percent and a glucose time-in-range more than 70% may reduce your risk of developing diabetes-related eye conditions.

Be sure to schedule an annual comprehensive eye exam with your eye doctor at least once a year so they can detect any eye health problems early and treat them before they become severe.



Optometrist

Eye health specialist who examines, diagnoses and manages eye-related disorders.



Ophthalmologist

Medical or osteopathic doctors who are licensed to provide medical and surgical eye care.



Optician

Adjust glasses and contact lenses based on your prescription



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