

What is an ophthalmologist?

An ophthalmologist (Eye M.D.) is a medical doctor with additional specialized training in all aspects of eye care—medical, surgical and optical.

How is an ophthalmologist different from an optometrist and an optician?

Ophthalmologists are different from optometrists and opticians in their training and in what they can diagnose and treat. As a medical doctor, an ophthalmologist is licensed to practice medicine and surgery. An ophthalmologist diagnoses and treats all eye diseases, performs eye surgery and prescribes and fits eyeglasses and contact lenses. Ophthalmologists complete:

- four years of college;
- four years of medical school;
- one year of internship;
- three years, at least, of residency (hospital-based training) in the diagnosis and medical and surgical treatment of eye disorders.

An **optometrist** is a doctor of optometry, licensed to practice optometry. Optometrists determine the need for eyeglasses and contact lenses, prescribe optical correction and screen for abnormalities of the eye. In many states, optometrists can prescribe a limited number of drugs to help diagnose and treat certain eye

conditions. Optometrists generally do not perform surgery. Optometrists attend two to four years of college and four years of optometric college.

An **optician**—licensed by a state to make optical aids—fits, adjusts and dispenses eyeglasses, contact lenses and other optical devices on written prescriptions of a licensed ophthalmologist or optometrist. Training for an optician varies from a preceptorship to two years of opticianry school.

How does an ophthalmologist become certified?

After four years of college and eight additional years of medical education and training, an ophthalmologist must pass a rigorous two-part examination given by the American Board of Ophthalmology.

What is a subspecialist?

While all ophthalmologists specialize in eye problems and can treat all conditions, some decide to specialize in a specific area of medical or surgical eye care. This person is called a subspecialist. He or she usually completes a fellowship, which is one or two more years of training in the chosen area. Some subspecialists focus on the treatment of a disease such as glaucoma. Others subspecialize in a particular part of the eye such as

the retina. Pediatric ophthalmologists subspecialize in treating eye disease in children.

When should I see an ophthalmologist?

You should have your eyes examined by an ophthalmologist if you have:

- decreased vision, even if temporary;
- new floaters (black “strings” or specks in the vision);
- flashes of light;
- a curtain or veil blocking vision;
- spots or colored spots around lights;
- an eye injury or eye pain;
- bulging or protruding eyes;
- crossed eyes;
- double vision;
- loss of peripheral (side) vision;
- diabetes mellitus;
- AIDS;



- thyroid disease-related eye problems (Graves’ disease);
- a family history of eye disease.

You should also see an ophthalmologist if your family doctor, pediatrician or internist refers you to one.

When there are no particular problems, recommended intervals for eye examinations are:

Newborn, pre-school and pre-teen: Eye exams should be given by a pediatrician, family doctor or ophthalmologist at the following intervals:

- newborn to 3 months
- 6 months to 1 year
- 3 years old
- 5 years old
- later as needed

20 to 29 years of age: At least once during this period; African Americans, because of greater risk for glaucoma, should be seen every three to five years.

30 to 39 years of age: At least twice during this period; African Americans, because of greater risk for glaucoma, should be seen every two to four years.

40 to 64 years of age: Every two to four years.

65 years or older: Every one to two years.

The American Academy of Ophthalmology is an organization of 25,000 ophthalmologists (Eye M.D.s) dedicated to preserving eye health and sight.

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What happens during an eye examination?

Your ophthalmologist and his or her assistants ask about your current symptoms and review your medical history. Eyedrops to dilate your eyes may or may not be used during the exam.

The examination typically evaluates:

- visual acuity;
- need for eyeglasses or contact lenses (refraction);
- eyelid health and function;
- coordination of eye muscles;
- pupil response to light;
- side (peripheral) vision;
- intraocular pressure (pressure inside the eye);
- the anterior segment in the eye (the area in front of the lens, including the cornea and iris);
- the interior and back of the eye.

What treatments are available for my eyes?

Your ophthalmologist will discuss the results of your eye examination with you. If your eyes are healthy, you may need only eyeglasses or contact lenses to correct your vision. Or you may not need any vision correction at all.

Some eye diseases are treated with medication, such as eyedrops or pills. Other diseases may require laser surgery or other surgical procedures.

Your ophthalmologist can provide you with the treatment you need or, in some cases, may refer you to a subspecialist.

Some eye conditions cannot be cured. Nevertheless, your ophthalmologist can offer counseling and support while monitoring your condition.

Good medical care is based on a cooperative relationship between you and your doctor. You should trust your ophthalmologist to give you accurate information about your eye problem and tell you about the risks and benefits of treatment options. You should also trust your ophthalmologist to keep your personal information confidential and to provide care with courtesy and respect. Your role in this cooperative relationship is to ask your ophthalmologist questions about your problem and treatment options and tell him or her about any other health factors that may affect your condition.

Loss of sight can be prevented! Many eye diseases do not cause symptoms for months or years before regular visits to your ophthalmologist become important as regular visits to your family physician. In many cases, early treatment of glaucoma, diabetic eye disease, crossed eyes and some forms of macular degeneration can prevent loss of sight and even blindness.

Together, you and your ophthalmologist work toward the goal of protecting your sight through early diagnosis and treatment of eye conditions.

Notes

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