What is an Ophthalmologist?

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An ophthalmologist is the only medical doctor who can take complete care of your eyes. They are trained and licensed to diagnose and treat *all* eye diseases and conditions. From basic eye exams to complex surgery, ophthalmologists provide everything you need for healthy vision.

How are ophthalmologists different from optometrists and opticians?

Many people do not understand the difference between an ophthalmologist, an optometrist and an optician. Each plays an important role in providing eye care. But they are quite different from each other, based on what they are trained to do.

An **ophthalmologist** is a medical doctor (M.D.) or a doctor of osteopathy (D.O.). They are trained and licensed to treat all eye diseases and conditions. They are the only eye care providers who can practice both medicine and surgery. They complete at least 12 years of training, including 4 years of college and at least 8 years of additional medical training. Many ophthalmologists specialize in a certain part of the eye or in treating specific diseases. Also, many ophthalmologists do scientific research to find causes and cures for eye diseases.

An **optometrist** is a doctor of optometry (O.D.), trained and licensed to provide some aspects of eye care. They complete at least 3 years of college and 4 years of optometry training from a school of optometry. They are licensed to do eye exams and vision tests, prescribe and dispense corrective lenses, detect certain eye problems, and prescribe medicine for various eye diseases. They cannot perform surgery and they can only prescribe certain medications.

An **optician** is not an eye doctor. They are professionals who prepare, measure and adjust the fit of eyeglass or contact prescriptions written by an ophthalmologist or optometrist. An optician has a minimum of a 2-year degree in opticianry or a 6,000-hour apprenticeship education and is licensed in their state.

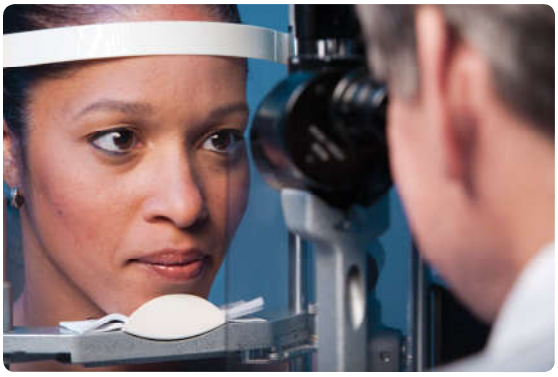
When should you see an ophthalmologist?

Here are some situations when you should see an ophthalmologist.

- You have had an eye injury.
- You have symptoms of eye disease. These symptoms include:
  - Blurry or distorted vision, double vision, or loss of peripheral (side) vision
  - Seeing floaters (that look like black strings or specks), flashes of light, or halos (rings) around objects
  - Having what seems to be a curtain or veil blocking your vision
  - Problems with the eye itself, such as bulging of one or both eyes, misaligned (crossed) eyes, excess tears, or changes to your eyelid
  - Eye pain or unusual redness
  - Family history of eye disease

- You are at least 40 years old. A complete eye screening is recommended at age 40. This screening will tell you if you are at risk for eye disease.
- Your primary care provider or optometrist refers you.
- Your ophthalmologist recommends regular visits to monitor your eye health.

With many eye diseases, you may not notice any problems with your vision for months or years. Regular visits to your ophthalmologist are important to find problems as they develop.



If you have any questions about your eyes or your vision, speak with an ophthalmologist. He or she is committed to protecting your sight.

When to have an eye exam

The American Academy of Ophthalmology recommends eye exams at these stages:

Babies (pediatric vision screenings that can be done by a pediatrician, nurse, primary care doctor, ophthalmologist)

- Newborns
- Before 6 months old
- Between 6 months old and until the child is old enough to follow directions to have their vision tested

Children (pediatric vision screenings that can be done by a pediatrician, nurse, primary care doctor, ophthalmologist)

- 3–4 years old
- 4–5 years old
- Every 1–2 years after age 5

Adults (complete medical eye exam by an ophthalmologist)

- Under 40 years old—every 5–10 years
- Eye disease screening at 40 years old. Your ophthalmologist will tell you when to return for eye exams based on your history and what they find in this screening exam.
- 40–54 years old—every 2–4 years
- 55–64 years old—every 1–3 years
- 65 years old and every 1–2 years after, or as recommended by your ophthalmologist.

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