

Benefits Spotlight

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Eye Care Providers

A trip to the “eye doctor” can mean different things to different people. Some may think of their neighborhood optometrist as their “eye doctor.” Others may go to an ophthalmologist. There are several different kinds of eye care professionals. And that can make things a little confusing. So let’s look at the differences between opticians, optometrists and ophthalmologists.

Opticians¹

Opticians are trained to design and fit eyeglass lenses and frames, contact lenses and other eye correction devices. They don’t conduct eye exams. While opticians work with prescriptions, they don’t write them. And they’re not permitted to diagnose or treat eye diseases.

Optometrists²

Optometrists are doctors of optometry (ODs) but are not medical doctors (MDs). After completing their undergraduate degrees, optometrists must complete four years of optometry school.

They provide primary vision care — including vision testing and correction, as well as diagnosis and treatment of vision changes and writing prescriptions for corrective lenses. Optometrists can detect certain eye abnormalities, and they can prescribe medication for some eye diseases.

Ophthalmologists³

Ophthalmologists are medical doctors — either MDs (doctors of medicine) or DOs (doctors of osteopathy). Their training requires an undergraduate degree, four or more years of medical school, one year of internship and three years of an ophthalmology residency. Additionally, ophthalmologists must be licensed by their state’s medical board to practice medicine and surgery.

They provide medical and surgical care of the eyes and the body’s visual system. That includes conducting eye exams, writing prescriptions for eyeglasses and contact lenses, diagnosing and treating eye- and vision-related diseases and performing surgery.

Eye care professionals at a glance

	Optician	Optometrist	Ophthalmologist
Performs eye exams	No	Yes	Yes
Training/education	Trained to design/fit lenses and frames	Four years of optometry school plus three or more years of college	Four years of college, four years of medical school and a few more years of residency
Is a medical doctor	No	No	Yes
When to see	For eyeglasses or contacts when you already have a prescription	For basic eye exams and prescriptions for eyeglasses/contacts	For complete eye care, including detection and treatment of eye diseases

Regular eye exams are critical

Annual eye exams are the best way for eye care professionals to detect potential eye problems early. If it's been more than a year since your last eye exam, contact your optometrist or ophthalmologist to schedule an appointment.

Most vision plans — including DeltaVision — cover annual eye exams. (If you're not sure if you have DeltaVision, ask your human resources representative.)

¹Difference between an Ophthalmologist, Optometrist and Optician, American Association for Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus, <https://www.aapos.org/terms/conditions/132>

²Difference between an Ophthalmologist, Optometrist and Optician, American Association for Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus, <https://www.aapos.org/terms/conditions/132>

³What are the Differences between Ophthalmologists, Optometrists and Opticians?, Digital Journal of Ophthalmology, Harvard University, <http://www.djo.harvard.edu/site.php?url=/patients/pi/439>

Readers Ask, We Answer

Kelly writes: “What’s the difference between an overbite and an underbite?”

We answer: Hi, Kelly! An overbite is when the top row of teeth overlaps or sticks out beyond the bottom row of teeth. An underbite is just the opposite – when the bottom row overlaps the top.

It’s quite common to have an overbite or underbite, but a severe condition can lead to problems such as chipped or fractured teeth, tooth decay, gum disease and strain on the teeth, jaws and muscles.

Bite problems can also compromise speech. Underbites and overbites can often be corrected with orthodontic treatment, including removable and fixed options, such as retainers and braces. Severe cases may need surgery. Your dentist can recommend the best treatment to help with your condition