

Call For Action: A Guide to Contact Lenses

Approximately 45 million Americans wear contact lenses. Advances and technology have made contacts a much more popular form of vision correction. The federal government has also implemented guidelines for contact lens prescribers and sellers.

The FTC Contact Lens Rule contains two key requirements: (insert link to FTC rule)

- Contact lens prescribers (i.e., optometrists and ophthalmologists) must provide patients with a copy of their contact lens prescription at the completion of a contact lens fitting.
- Contact lens sellers cannot provide contact lenses to their customer unless the seller either obtains a copy of the prescription or verifies the prescription information with the prescriber through procedures set forth in the Rule.

These requirements enhance consumer choice and have created a vibrant online marketplace. Since 2011, online sales for the optical industry, including glasses and contact lenses, have doubled.

How do I get contact lenses?

Contact lenses are only available by prescription. You will need a comprehensive in-person eye exam from an authorized prescriber, such as an ophthalmologist, optometrist, or licensed optician. Typically, your eye doctor will require you come in for a reexamination annually. Some states require prescriptions to be valid for at least two years; [a summary of state laws is available here](#).

Here are some important tips about the rules and regulations governing prescribers:

- Prescribers are required to give you a copy of your eyeglass or contact lens prescription at the end of your fitting, even if you don't ask for it.
- Prescribers **cannot** require you to buy glasses or contact lenses, pay additional fees, or sign a waiver or release in exchange for a copy of your prescription.
- Prescribers are also required to provide or verify the glasses or contact lens prescription to anyone who is designated to act on your behalf, including a contact lens retailer you have chosen.
- When verifying your prescription, prescribers are required to correct any inaccuracy in the prescription and to inform the seller if your prescription has expired and specify the reason it is invalid.
- Prescribers **cannot** deny liability or responsibility for the accuracy of an eye examination.
- Prescribers **may** require you to pay for the eye exam, fitting and evaluation before giving you a copy of the glasses or contact lens prescription, but only if they also require immediate payment from patients whose eye exams do not result in the prescription of corrective eye care products.
- Prescribers **may** set an expiration date for your prescription. They can only set a date sooner than one year if the earlier expiration date is based on the prescribers' medical judgment about your eye health, and the reason must be documented in detail and retained for at least 3 years, permitting review by a qualified medical professional.

How do I choose a seller?

Once you have your prescription (which your prescriber is required to give you following your eye exam) you can purchase contacts or glasses from online retailers, big box and warehouse stores, or your eye doctor. With an abundance of choices, it's good to keep a few things in mind:

- Pay attention to a company's customer service ratings, look at online reviews, and review return and exchange policies before deciding on a retailer.
- If you buy in bulk online, you may be able to get discounted prices and/or save on shipping costs. It may be best to comparison shop for pricing online before going to your exam. That way you'll know if the prescriber's prices are competitive.
- While your prescriber can't require you to buy lenses from them, they may actually offer a competitive discount if you buy lenses when you get your exam.
- If you have an unusual prescription, a bigger seller is more likely to have your prescription in stock and will be able to fill it more quickly. Smaller retailers may offer you lower prices, but can ultimately take a long time to fill your prescription if they don't have it in stock. A reputable seller should be able to tell you whether they have your prescription in stock and how long it will take to ship, if necessary.
- Take note of the brand prescribed and make sure your chosen retailer carries that brand

Breakout box: Once you have chosen a retailer and provided your prescription in person, via fax, or by email attachment, the seller is required to verify the prescription with your prescriber. The prescription is filled once the prescriber confirms the accuracy, makes needed corrections, or fails to communicate with the seller within "eight-business-hours." Business hours are defined as hours between 9am and 5pm, Monday through Friday, in the prescriber's time zone, excluding federal holidays. Saturday hours may also be counted if the prescriber has regular Saturday business hours. Keep this in mind if your seller experiences delays in verifying your prescription.

Is online renewal an option?

Doctors have been able to use new technology to develop online vision tests, which are now approved in some states for corrective lens prescription renewals. These tests are done using a computer or mobile device. Online renewals do not replace the need for periodic in-person exams, but they can make the maintenance of your prescription cheaper and easier. While an in-person eye exam typically costs \$163 on average, an online version costs about \$40 or less. You also save time and effort since you don't need to go to the doctor's office. Typically, you can only renew online if you've had an in-person eye exam within the last 4 years.

The online renewal process:

1. Patients answer a series of eligibility screening questions, including their state of residence, age, history of contact lens wearing, history of visual impairment, and health risk factors. About 30% of patients will get screened out based on eligibility factors and be referred for an in-person exam.
2. An online vision test is administered.
3. Vision test results are reviewed by an eye doctor licensed in the patient's state.
4. A renewed prescription is issued, typically within 24 hours of completing the vision test.

Even with online renewal as an option, the American Academy of Ophthalmology recommends in-person exams at the following intervals, based on the patient's age:

- Under 40 Every 5 – 10 years
- 40 – 54 Every 2 – 4 years

- 55 – 64 Every 1 – 3 years
- 65 or older Every 1 – 2 years

Online renewal tests will not detect or diagnose an eye disease.

Link to states that allow online renewal (if we can find this)

Consumer “wallet card” or box for mobile screenshot

FTC rules require:

- Contact lens prescribers (i.e., optometrists and ophthalmologists) must provide you with a copy of your contact lens prescription at the completion of a contact lens fitting, even if you don't ask for it.
- Prescribers **cannot** require you to buy glasses or contact lenses, pay additional fees, or sign a waiver or release in exchange for a copy of your prescription.

It may be best to comparison shop for pricing online before going to your exam.

Know before you go:

My most recent contact prescription would cost \$_____ per box from _____