

Contact lenses

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Overview

Most people who need to wear glasses can wear contact lenses. There are two main types of contact lenses:

- soft lenses which mould to the shape of your eye, and
- rigid gas-permeable lenses (RGP lenses) which fit close to the shape of your eye. These are much less flexible than soft lenses.



Watch our video about contact lenses at lookafteryoureyes.com/contact-lenses.



If you have any concerns about the health of your eyes, please visit your local optometrist. Optometrists are eye health specialists.

Are contact lenses safe?

Modern contact lenses are very safe, as long as you follow your optometrist's advice about how to wear and look after them, and have regular check-ups. However, it is possible that anything that touches your eye could cause an infection.

To reduce the chance of infection, you should always wash and dry your hands before touching your eyes or your contact lenses. If you are at home, try to use your own towel. If you are not at home, dry your hands with an air dryer or paper towel wherever possible. Never rinse or store your lenses in tap water because this could cause a very serious eye infection. You should also avoid showering while wearing your contact lenses.

If you wear any reusable lens, you will need to use special solutions to clean and disinfect them so that they are safe to put back into your eyes. You do not need to clean or disinfect single-use daily disposable lenses – as you do not reuse them. You just throw them away after use.



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Which type of contact lens is best for me?

The type of lens that is best for you will depend upon several things, including how often you want to wear your lenses. For example, do you want to wear them just for certain activities, such as sport? Or do you want to wear them most of the time instead of glasses?

CONTACT LENSES

Most contact lenses fitted in the UK are soft lenses. They are available as single-use daily, fortnightly and monthly disposable lenses. There are also specialist soft lens designs that last for longer. As soft lenses are more comfortable at first than RGP lenses, they are ideal if you only want to wear lenses occasionally.

RGP lenses can take a little more getting used to than soft lenses. This means they may not be suitable if you only want to wear contact lenses occasionally. RGP lenses last longer than soft lenses and are usually replaced every one to two years. This means that they may be cheaper in the long term than disposable soft lenses.

RGP lenses may be better if you have irregular-shaped eyes or astigmatism (see over the page). Special types of RGP lenses that you wear only at night are also available. These temporarily correct short-sightedness so that you do not need to wear glasses or contact lenses during the day. This treatment is called orthokeratology.

You might find that your eyes feel dry if you wear contact lenses. This may be worse with some types of lenses than others. If you notice this, make sure you mention this when you go for your contact lens check-up so that your optometrist or contact lens practitioner can suggest what to do about it. You may find that changing to a different type of contact lens or reducing the amount of time you wear your lenses will help you.



As soft lenses are more comfortable at first than RGP lenses, they are ideal for people who only want to wear lenses occasionally.

I need to wear different glasses for distance and reading – can I have bifocal or varifocal contact lenses?

When you reach your forties it is common to find that you need a different prescription for reading than you need for distance. This is called presbyopia. Presbyopia may mean that you need two pairs of glasses, or you need bifocal or varifocal glasses.

There are three main options for correcting presbyopia with contact lenses:

- You may choose to have contact lenses to correct your distance vision, and wear reading glasses over the top when you need them.
- You may have bifocal or varifocal contact lenses.
- You may wear lenses to have one eye corrected to see in the distance and one eye corrected for near vision. This is called monovision.

Each of the different options has advantages and disadvantages and your optometrist will help you decide which is best for you.

Can I wear contact lenses if I have astigmatism?

Astigmatism is where the cornea (the window at the front of the eye) or the lens inside the eye is shaped more like a rugby ball than a football.



When you reach your forties it is common to find that you need a different prescription for reading than you need for distance. This is called presbyopia.

CONTACT LENSES

As soft contact lenses mould to the shape of your eye, your astigmatism will still be present when you are wearing them. This means that you will need a toric lens to see clearly as these lenses correct the rugby-ball shape. There are many different types of soft toric contact lenses. Unless you have a lot of astigmatism, it is likely that your optometrist will be able to find a lens that suits you.

Unlike soft lenses, RGP lenses do not mould to the shape of your eyes, so they can correct some astigmatism without needing to be specially designed. This is because your tears fill in the gap between the RGP lens and your eye, correcting the astigmatism and allowing you to see clearly. This means that it doesn't matter if the lens rotates. But if you have a lot of astigmatism you may need to have toric RGP lenses. These lenses will be specially designed for you and so are unlikely to rotate on your eye. This means that they will give more stable vision than soft toric lenses.



There are many different types of soft toric contact lenses. Unless you have a lot of astigmatism, it is likely that your optometrist will be able to find a lens that suits you.

Is it better to have disposable lenses or those that last longer?

This is often a matter of personal choice. You do not need to clean and disinfect single-use daily disposable lenses after each use, as you simply throw them away. This can be a good option if you do not wear your lenses very often or you want the greatest convenience. This may also be more hygienic than cleaning, disinfecting and re-wearing lenses.

Not all contact lens types or prescriptions are available as single-use daily disposable lenses. Your optometrist will tell you what types of lenses are suitable for you.

If you wear lenses a lot, single-use daily disposable lenses may cost more than reusable disposable lenses. You should remember to include the cost of the care solutions if you are comparing them against the price of single-use daily disposable lenses.

Environmental effect

Contact lenses and their packaging can be recycled. Speak to your optometrist to find out more.



It is important to have regular check-ups to make sure that your contact lenses are still suitable for you, and are not damaging your eyes.



How long can I wear my contact lenses for?

There are many different types of contact lenses available. This means that most people can wear lenses for most of the day. If you find that your lenses are making your eyes look red or feel dry towards the end of the day, ask your optometrist or contact lens practitioner if you can try a different type.

Even if you tried contact lenses unsuccessfully in the past, modern lens materials may mean that you can now wear them for longer. Your optometrist will be able to tell you if this is the case.

Will I be able to put my lenses in and take them out?

With practice, most people can put their lenses in and take them out without any problems. Your optometrist or contact lens practitioner will make sure that you can handle the lenses safely before you take them home. Some contact lenses have a tint to make it easier for you to see them when you are putting them in and taking them out.



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It is important to have back-up glasses even if you wear contact lenses every day. We do not advise wearing contact lenses full time as it is important to give your eyes a break and your optometrist will recommend the best wearing schedule for you. If you need to wear glasses for reading, you may find you need to put your glasses on to handle and clean your contact lenses.

There is a video on how to put contact lenses in, and take them out, on our website at lookafteryoureyes.org/contact-lenses.



If your optometrist has told you that you can sleep in your contact lenses, it is important that you know what complications may develop and how to look out for them.

Can I sleep in contact lenses?

Some contact lenses have been designed to wear overnight. But research has shown that sleeping in contact lenses increases the risk of infection. Our advice is to remove your lenses before you go to bed. If your optometrist has said that you can sleep in your contact lenses, it is important that you know what complications may develop and how to look out for them.

If you are short-sighted, you may be able to wear special contact lenses that you sleep in. These temporarily correct short-sightedness so that you do not need to wear glasses or contact lenses during the day. This is called orthokeratology.

Can I wear makeup with contact lenses?

If you want to wear makeup with contact lenses, it is important to follow the advice below.

- Put your contact lenses in before you put your makeup on.
- Wear water-soluble makeup, not waterproof makeup. If you get waterproof makeup in your eye, it will not dissolve in your tears and may get trapped under your contact lens.
- Do not wear eyeliner on the inside edge of your eyelids, as it may block the glands that produce part of your tears. If you wear eyeliner, you should put it on the skin outside your lashes.



We do not recommend swimming in contact lenses. There is an organism that lives in water that can cause a very serious infection if it gets in your eye.

Can I swim in contact lenses?

We do not recommend swimming in contact lenses. This is because there is an organism that lives in water (acanthamoeba) that can cause a very serious infection if it gets in your eye. If you need glasses and want to see clearly while you are swimming, we recommend prescription swimming goggles.

Can I get contact lenses to change the colour of my eyes?

Soft contact lenses which change the colour of your eyes are available either with a prescription to correct your vision, or without.

Coloured and novelty lenses without a prescription to correct vision are called zero-powered lenses. In the UK it is illegal to sell zero-powered contact lenses unless they are fitted by or under the supervision of an optometrist, contact lens practitioner or doctor. Make sure you always buy your lenses from somewhere that does this.



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Can I buy my contact lenses online?

As contact lenses touch your eyes they must be the right shape and prescription to allow you to see clearly. This means they must be fitted by a qualified optometrist, contact lens practitioner or doctor. When the optometrist, contact lens practitioner or doctor is satisfied that your lenses are suitable, you will get a copy of your contact lens prescription. This is also known as a contact lens specification.

Wherever you buy your lenses it is important to make sure they are the same as the ones you have been fitted with and not a substitute. You should also make sure that you get them from a reputable supplier. Only then can you be sure that they are suitable for you.

Can children wear contact lenses?

Children can successfully wear contact lenses. There is no set age when a child becomes old enough to wear contact lenses, as it will depend on the particular child. They will need to be mature enough to clean and handle their lenses and broadly understand the risks of wearing contact lenses. Parents or guardians should be involved in the process throughout, so that they can help if needed.



As contact lenses touch your eyes they must be the right shape and prescription to allow you to see clearly.

Do I need to have regular check-ups if I wear contact lenses?

It is important to have regular check-ups to make sure that your contact lenses are still suitable for you, and are not damaging your eyes. Your optometrist or contact lens practitioner will tell you how often you need to have check-ups. This will depend on things such as the type of lenses you wear and how long you wear them for.

Your contact lens prescription will have an expiry date. You will not be able to buy lenses after that date. It is important that you have a contact lens check-up before your prescription runs out if you want to continue to buy lenses.

This information should not replace advice that your optometrist or other relevant health professional gives you.

For more information, please talk to your local optometrist.

If you have any concerns about the health of your eyes, please visit your local optometrist. Optometrists are eye health specialists. An eye examination is a vital health check and should be part of everyone's regular health care.

Visit **lookafteryoureyes.org** for clear and helpful information on vision and eye health issues and keeping your eyes healthy.

The College of Optometrists

The College of Optometrists is the professional body for optometry. We provide qualifications, guidance and development opportunities for optometrists so that they can maintain and develop the knowledge and skills they need to deliver the highest standards of care. Membership of the College shows your optometrist's commitment to the very highest clinical, ethical and professional standards. Look for the letters MCOptom or FCOptom to see if your optometrist is a member or fellow of the College.

Other letters after your optometrist's name mean they have done further training and gained extra qualifications in diagnosing and managing specific eye conditions. The qualifications are available in different subject areas such as low vision, paediatric eye care, glaucoma and macular degeneration.

YOUR LOCAL OPTOMETRIST



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