

What is the difference between an optometrist and an ophthalmologist?

Many people are confused about which eye care provider they should see: an ophthalmologist or an optometrist. What is the difference? The differences between the two types of professionals are in the nature and length of their training, and their resulting ability to treat diseases of the eyes with medicine and surgery.

Optometrists train for four years after college in an approved optometric school. The primary focus of their education is on the examination of the eyes, the optics of the eyes (and the arts of refraction and contact lens fitting), and on recognizing disease in the eye. Optometrists may do postgraduate training for one or two years although this is not a requirement, and may specialize (for example in pediatric

optometry) with or without additional training. Optometrists typically have an OD degree (doctor of optometry). Depending on the state they practice in, they may be allowed to prescribe some medications for treatment of common eye conditions.

Ophthalmologists train for four years after college in medical or osteopathic medical school, and earn an MD or DO degree. During this time, ophthalmologists learn about all aspects of medicine, and are required to complete training in internal medicine, general and specialty surgery, and pediatrics, among other requirements. All ophthalmologists then complete a one year medical or surgical internship, which involves caring for very ill patients in a hospital setting. Ophthalmologists must then complete the examinations of the National Board of Medical Examiners (NBME) in order to obtain a license to practice medicine. All ophthalmologists then complete at least three years of residency training, during which time they learn advanced medical and surgical management of all disease of the eyes and its surrounding tissues. Ophthalmology residency training is regulated by the American College of Graduate Medical Education, who review each program regularly. Most programs entail at least 8,000 hours of hands-on, supervised training after internship, along with about 1,000 hours of classroom instruction. Many ophthalmologists then complete 1 to 2 additional years of optional subspecialty training (for example, in corneal disease, retinal disease, glaucoma, pediatric ophthalmology, or oculoplastic facial surgery).

Most ophthalmologists obtain certification from the American Board of Ophthalmology, which requires a two-year testing process after graduation from residency; since 1991, Board Certification requires maintenance with continuing education and testing throughout the ophthalmologist's career. Ophthalmologists are licensed as physicians and surgeons by their state, and are allowed to prescribe any FDA-approved medication including controlled substances, for the management of disease. Ophthalmologists are trained surgeons and may perform all manner of surgery on the eye including biopsies, injections of medicines in or around the eyes, cataract surgery, glaucoma surgery, corneal surgery, surgery for strabismus (crossed eyes), retinal surgery, and oculoplastic surgery of the lids and face. Ophthalmologists can perform surgery with lasers or with traditional surgical instruments. Ophthalmologists are trained as physicians first, and are comfortable treating patients with a wide range of systemic diseases, including diabetes, hypertension, and neurologic disease (which may all have findings in the eye).



		Optometrist	Ophthalmologist
Training	4 years college	●	●
	4 years optometric school	●	
	4 years medical school		●
	1 year medical/surgical internship		●
	1 year optometric internship	optional	
	3 year medical and surgical residency		●
	1-2 year surgical fellowship		optional
	Total training post college	4 – 5 years	8 – 10 years
Practice	Refraction for glasses	●	●
	Fitting contact lenses	●	●
	Basic Eye Examination	●	●
	Topical drops for specific conditions	●	●
	Oral medications (any)		●
	Can prescribe controlled substances		●
	Can perform surgery on the eye		●
	Can perform laser surgery on the eye		●
	Can biopsy ocular and lid tissues		●
	Can inject medicines in or around the eye		●
	Has hospital admitting privileges		●
	Can treat significant ocular trauma		●

Should I see an optometrist or ophthalmologist?

Some patients will be equally well-served seeing an optometrist or an ophthalmologist. These include individuals interested in being tested for glasses for distance or reading, fit for contact lenses, or having a routine eye examination. However, for more serious eye conditions, such as cataract, macular degeneration, glaucoma, strabismus or diabetic eye disease, only ophthalmologists have the training to provide all manners of treatment including surgery.

The Washington Academy of Eye Physicians and Surgeons (WAEPS) is happy to help you find the appropriate professional to care for your eyes.

