

Your Eye Care Team: The Three “O’s”

Ophthalmologists, Optometrists, and Opticians

The eye care team encompasses several different medical specialists who work together to provide eye care for patients. Led by **ophthalmologists**, the medical doctors who specialize in eye care and surgery, the eye care team includes **optometrists** and **opticians**, as well as nurses, medical assistants, techs and photographers. Each person serves a different role on the team.

Difference Between Ophthalmologists and Optometrists:

The distinction between **ophthalmology** and **optometry** is a frequent source of confusion. In addition to the fact that both are concerned with eye care, several other factors contribute to this misunderstanding. One source of confusion stems from the fact that optometrists are often referred to as eye doctors although, unlike ophthalmologists, they do not have medical degrees.

In addition, as a result of recent legislation state-by-state, organized optometry has been able to expand the powers of various state optometry boards, which then license optometrists to prescribe and administer diagnostic and therapeutic pharmaceutical agents. As a result, organized optometry has politically self-defined an optometrist to be a "primary eye care provider."

Optometrists are not medical doctors or trained surgeons. An optometrist receives a “Doctor of Optometry” degree (OD) and is licensed to practice optometry, not medicine. The practice of optometry traditionally involves examining the eye for the purpose of prescribing and dispensing corrective lenses, and screening vision to detect certain eye abnormalities. In comparison, the scope of an ophthalmologist’s practice is much broader.

Ophthalmologists (M.D.s) are medical doctors and trained eye surgeons. An ophthalmologist specializes in all aspects of eye care including diagnosis, management, and surgery of eye diseases and disorders, including conditions of the eyelid. Ophthalmologists also routinely carry out many of the same tasks as optometrists. The difference between the training of an optometrist and that of an ophthalmologist underscores the difference in the range of practice.

- An optometrist may have only seven years of *post-high school* training, consisting of three to four years of college and four years in optometry school. There is no required post-optometry school residency.
- An ophthalmologist receives a minimum of 12 years of education, which typically includes four years of college, four years of medical school, one or more years of general clinical training and three or more years in a hospital-based surgical residency program, often followed by one or more years of subspecialty fellowship.
- It is in the three years of residency that an ophthalmologist trains how to become an eye surgeon, treating and operating on real patients with real conditions under the one-on-one supervision of an attending academic ophthalmologist.

Beyond refractive errors, optometrists have limited exposure in training to patients with eye disorders or health problems. Didactic training in medical, pharmaceutical and ocular subjects averages approximately one year. In contrast, ophthalmologists have a full medical education, followed by extensive clinical and surgical training in ophthalmology, with thousands of hours devoted to the care and treatment of sick patients, including surgery.

Opticians:

Opticians are technicians trained to design, verify and fit eyeglass lenses and frames, contact lenses, and other devices to correct eyesight. They use prescriptions supplied by either ophthalmologists or optometrists, but do not test vision or write prescriptions for visual corrections. Opticians are not permitted to diagnose or treat eye diseases.