

# Contact lenses



THE COLLEGE  
OF OPTOMETRISTS

# 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
- **gas permeable** lenses (RGP lenses) which are fitted closely to the shape of your eye and are less flexible.

Most contact lenses fitted in the UK are soft lenses. They are available as single use daily, fortnightly and monthly disposable lenses, and more specialist lenses that are designed to last for longer. 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. Like a fitted leather shoe, RGP lenses can take a little more getting used to than soft lenses, and so are not suitable if you only want to wear lenses occasionally.

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 – you just throw them away after use.

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

If you wear any reusable lens, you will need to use special solution to clean and disinfect them so that they are safe to put back into your eyes.

Which type of contact lens is best for me?

The type of lens that is best for you will depend upon several factors. These include 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?

As soft lenses are initially more comfortable than RGP lenses, they are ideal for people who only want to wear lenses occasionally. RGP lenses are a little more uncomfortable than soft lenses at first, so they take a bit more getting used to. But, they last longer and may be better for people who have irregularly shaped eyes or have astigmatism (see below). Special types of RGP lenses that you wear only at night, are available to temporarily correct short sight. This treatment is called orthokeratology.

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. This means that if you wear a soft contact lens, you will need a toric lens to see clearly. Toric lenses take the rugby ball shape into account, but if they rotate on your eye you will not see clearly. Soft contact lenses that correct astigmatism are specially designed not to rotate. There are many different types of soft toric contact lenses and, unless you have a lot of astigmatism, it is likely that your optometrist will be able to find a lens that suits you.

As RGP lenses do not mould to your eyes like soft lenses, they can correct some astigmatism without needing to be specially designed. This is because your tears fill in the gap between the lens and your eye, neutralising the astigmatism and allowing you to see clearly. This means that it doesn't matter if the lens rotates. 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.

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 for people who do not wear their lenses very often or who want maximum convenience. This may also be more hygienic than cleaning, disinfecting and re-wearing old 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 non-daily disposable lenses (those that you clean and disinfect and then wear again), although you should remember to include the cost of contact lens solutions if you are comparing the price of single use daily disposable lenses with the price of non-daily disposable lenses.

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.

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

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. It is possible that anything that touches your eye could introduce an infection. To reduce the chance of infection you should always wash and dry your hands before touching your eyes or your contact lenses. Use liquid soap rather than a bar of soap. If you are at home you should try to use your own towel. If you are not at home you should dry your hands with an air dryer or paper towel wherever possible. Never rinse your lenses with tap water, or store your lenses in tap water because this may cause an infection in your eye. You should also avoid showering while wearing your contact lenses.

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 as a safer alternative. These need not be expensive.

Even if you tried contact lenses unsuccessfully a few years ago, you may find that modern lens materials mean that you can now wear them for longer.

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. You may find that your eyes look red or feel dry towards the end of the day, so your optometrist may advise you not to wear them for too long. Even if you tried contact lenses unsuccessfully a few years ago, you may find that modern lens materials mean that you can now wear them for longer. Your optometrist will be able to advise if this is the case.

Can I sleep in contact lenses?

Although some contact lenses have been designed to wear overnight, research has shown that sleeping in contact lenses greatly increases the risk of infection. Our advice is to remove your lenses before you go to bed. 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. You must also be able to take your lenses out in an emergency.

If you are short sighted, you may be able to wear special contact lenses that you sleep in. These temporarily correct your short sight so that you can see clearly during the day without glasses or contact lenses. This is called orthokeratology.

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. This may mean that you need two pairs of glasses, or you need bifocal or varifocal glasses.

There are three main options to correct presbyopia with contact lenses.

1. You may choose to have contact lenses to correct your distance vision, and wear reading glasses over the top when you need them.
2. You may have bifocal or varifocal contact lenses.
3. 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.

Sleeping in contact lenses greatly increases the risk of infection. Our advice is to remove your lenses before you go to bed.

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

Most people are able to put their lenses in and take them out without any problems, although it can take some practice. It is important to have back-up glasses even if you wear contact lenses every day. If you need to wear glasses for reading, you may find you need to put your glasses on to handle your contact lenses (for example, so you can see clearly when cleaning them). Your contact lens practitioner will make sure that you are able to handle the lenses safely before you take them home.

Some contact lenses are lightly tinted to make it easier for you to see them when you are putting them in and taking them out. This tint will not affect your sight and is called a handling tint. This is much lighter than the tint that is used to change the colour of your eyes, and you will not notice it when you wear your contact lenses.

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

Soft contact lenses are available which change the colour of your eyes. You can get these either with a prescription in them to correct your vision, or without. You can also get novelty contact lenses which do not have a prescription in them. Even though these are sold as novelty items, they still touch your eye and carry a risk of infection, so it is important to make sure that they are fitted by a qualified professional, just like those which are not coloured. Your optometrist will be able to give you more information.

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.



Can I wear make up with contact lenses?

You can wear make up with contact lenses, but it is best to put your contact lenses in before you put your make up on. It is best to wear water-soluble make up, rather than waterproof, as if this gets into your eye it will dissolve in your tears and not get trapped under your contact lens. You should not wear eyeliner on the 'wet' part of the edge of your lids, as it may block the glands that produce part of your tears. Instead, you should put it on the skin, outside your lashes.

Can I get my contact lenses online?

As contact lenses touch your eyes they must be the right prescription to allow you to see clearly, and the right shape to stop them damaging your eyes. This means they must be fitted by a qualified optometrist, contact lens optician or doctor. When the contact lens practitioner is satisfied that the lenses are suitable for you, they will give you a copy of your contact lens prescription (specification). Wherever you buy your lenses it is important to make sure that the lenses you are supplied with are exactly the same as the ones you have been fitted with, as only then can you be sure that they are suitable for you.

As contact lenses touch your eyes they must be the right prescription to allow you to see clearly, and the right shape to stop them damaging your eyes. This means they must be fitted by a qualified optometrist, contact lens optician or doctor.

It is important that you have a contact lens check-up before your specification runs out if you want to continue to buy lenses.

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. This should be at least every 12 months, but may be more often if recommended by your practitioner. Wherever you buy your lenses you should check whether the price you are paying includes these check-ups. Your contact lens specification will contain 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 specification runs out if you want to continue to buy lenses.



**For more information, please talk to your local optometrist.**

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If you also spot the letters Dip CL or Higher Cert CL after your optometrist's name, this means that they have undertaken further training, and have completed either the Professional Diploma or Professional Higher Certificate in Contact Lens Practice.

**Please visit [www.lookafteryoureyes.org](http://www.lookafteryoureyes.org) for more information.**

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

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