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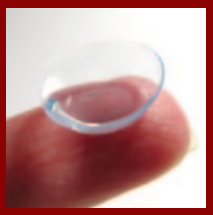
Viewed through a lens

Contents



Three million people across the UK currently wear contact lenses and there are many reasons behind this steady growth in popularity. From comfort to ease of use, contacts can deliver crystal-clear and comfortable vision, making them a viable option for many patients nowadays.

Soft daily disposable contact lenses have become very common and their wear-once design makes them quick and easy to use, while a high water content improves comfort and allows plenty of oxygen to reach the eye's surface. Daily disposables can be worn only when they are needed, and since each lens comes in an individual blister pack, no cleaning is required. Alternatively, leave-in contact lenses are also growing in popularity; these can be worn for up to 30 days and don't need to be removed overnight.

Modern innovations include toric lenses, comprising an asymmetric design for people with astigmatism who couldn't comfortably wear normal spherical lenses. Contacts can be tinted or coloured (often for purely aesthetic reasons) and some incorporate UV protection against the sun's harmful rays, while different prescriptions can be used in each eye as required. Bifocal contact lenses perform a similar role to the equivalent spectacles, and multifocal lenses give excellent vision at most distances.

The advantages of contact lenses are numerous. If your eyes are one of your best features, for example, contact lenses will show them off to their fullest. Contacts are also invaluable in many other situations, like physical sports or certain hobbies, while people with outdoor jobs can benefit from not having raindrops obscuring their spectacle lenses. Children can often wear contacts safely too, typically from the age of ten upwards. Your optician can advise on whether contact lenses might be a suitable option, as well as providing comprehensive information on the various types of lenses available.

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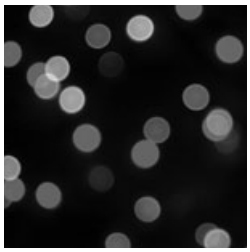
From humble beginnings, sunglasses have become an essential accessory in every wardrobe, for functional and stylish reasons alike. They come in numerous shapes and styles with a broad palette of lens colours and frame designs available to suit personal preferences. Aesthetic choices are only a small part of the story, since sunglasses are really defined by their lenses.

Regardless of their intended role, some key rules apply when choosing a suitable pair of sunglasses. Firstly, and most importantly, the lenses must filter out ultraviolet light – UVA and UVB – purely decorative sunglasses with no UV protection can actually damage the eyes by forcing the pupils to open wider and allowing more harmful UV rays in. For those unfamiliar with the light spectrum, ultraviolet light exists beyond our vision, with similar properties to the colour we perceive as violet. It is especially prevalent in sunlight and causes various chemical reactions in humans, including the formation of vitamin D and changes in skin pigmentation – the process of tanning. While a little UV radiation might be good for your complexion, it is potentially very harmful to the eyes whose delicacy makes them sensitive to these wavelengths. The corneas, lenses and retinas are especially susceptible to UV damage, with possible consequences of over-exposure including macular degeneration and cataracts. This is particularly crucial for children, whose eyes are still developing.

As it becomes more extreme, the scientific categorisation of ultraviolet light changes; UVA light is the closest to our vision spectrum, UVB is more extreme and so on. Most types of glass will block some UVA rays, while any decent set of sunglasses should repel 100 per cent of both types. Buying sunglasses from your independent Optician will mean that you get the right advice and can wear your sunglasses with confidence knowing that they offer full protection and are suitable for your needs.

Key types of lenses include the polarising variety, which don't just protect against the sun's rays – they also reduce reflective glare, such as sunlight on water or snowy ground, while the relatively new phenomenon of photochromic lenses adjust their tint automatically depending on ambient light levels. Consequently, they only become conventional sunglasses when it's necessary. Scratch-resistant coatings and shatterproof lenses are other beneficial features that can help to preserve your sunglasses, which typically lead a harder life than spectacles. Polycarbonate lenses are very light and impact-resistant, making them ideal for wearing during outdoor sporting activities.

Finally, choosing a suitable shape for your sunglasses frames is almost as important as the quality of the lenses. Small shades perched on your nose will provide very little protection – instead, look for wide or wraparound designs that completely block out direct light and prevent peripheral glare.



There is an eye condition that receives very little attention or coverage, despite being present in millions of people. Known variously as floaters, motes and spots, this is the phenomenon where small translucent shapes appear to float around your field of vision. Although it is usually harmless, this process can be a symptom of more significant eye-related problems, so understanding the condition is very important.

Floaters are tiny particles drifting slowly in the vitreous gel behind the lens, and they are usually caused by a thinning of the gel that fills each eyeball. This process occurs in the centre of the eye, while the collagen-laden outer gel remains thicker and heavier. Some of these particles can break away from the back of the eye, where they were formerly bound to the retina, migrating towards the centre and floating harmlessly amid the thinner liquids. The presence of these floaters blocks light from reaching the back of the eye, which is particularly notable when looking at bright objects like sunny skies or computer screens. Floaters move in tandem with the eye but inertia continues to propel them after movement has ceased, so they often seem to slide from one side of your vision to the other.

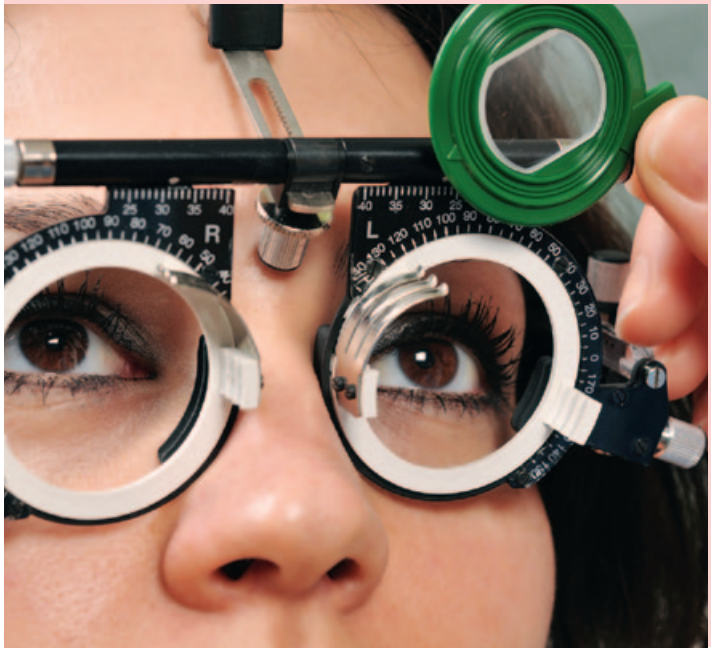
Short-sightedness heightens the risk of floaters occurring and they become more prevalent as people age, occurring in most elderly patients. Another common symptom involves flashing lights, which indicates that the retina is being pressured or moved by the floaters as they break off. The retina's sensitivity means that any change of pressure can trigger electrical impulses similar to the impact of light, which cause the brain to mistakenly interpret the presence of light. This can also happen after a blow to the head, and is often referred to as "seeing stars".

Although floaters occur naturally in many instances and are largely benign, they can also indicate vitreous or retinal detachments, which are much more serious. These conditions can occur at any age, caused by external factors such as diabetes, a blow to the head, or more specifically the eye and coughing or sneezing fits. Sudden bursts of floater activity (especially accompanied by flashing lights) often indicates a problem, as does a dark shadow developing across one eye. These conditions potentially require immediate attention to repair the damage and preserve sight levels. Retinal tears can also cause dark spots to appear as tiny blood droplets enter the eye - a relatively rare occurrence, but a likely indicator of a serious eye-related problem.

Any noticeable increase in floaters should be investigated by your optician, who can dilate your pupils and use sophisticated equipment to examine the inner eye, in order to monitor developments. Regular eye examinations are also vitally important in monitoring this common condition.

Dyslexia is one of the most common conditions in the UK, affecting roughly ten per cent of the population. Yet despite extensive research, we don't fully understand what causes it, and there is no universal definition for the condition. This is partly because dyslexia manifests itself differently in each patient, although it is most commonly associated with difficulties in learning to read and write, despite adequate intellect and teaching.

Dyslexia is named after the Greek term for "difficult words". It was first identified in Britain in the late 19th century, when it was known as "word blindness", and over the last 115 years, it has intrigued and frustrated scientists and doctors in equal measure. There remains some debate about whether dyslexia is a learning difficulty, since it relates to the way our brains process information rather than how they learn things, and MRI brain scans show that dyslexic patients process information differently to people unaffected by the condition. We do know that dyslexia can affect people of almost any intelligence; it is more common in boys than girls; and it is often hereditary, with around half of dyslexics passing on the condition.



Since dyslexia is a spectrum disorder, its severity and impact varies hugely from one patient to another. Some might simply struggle reading narrow newspaper columns, while others are unable to decipher words of any length, or write coherently. The condition typically becomes evident in early childhood, when reading and writing are the main skills being taught in school. People with dyslexia may also mispronounce words, while other tell-tale symptoms include poor time management and difficulties with orientation, like distinguishing left from right.

Although we don't yet fully understand dyslexia, there are many things that can be done to help reduce its impact. Recent research suggests that earlier diagnosis improves the effectiveness of future management, while coloured filters in spectacle lenses can make reading less difficult. Having a full binocular vision assessment will also help to establish if there is an underlying visual problem that needs correcting.

Non-sufferers can also help – for example, if you are writing something that will be read by a dyslexic, there are many things you can do to make the document easier for them to read. Use large sans-serif fonts, and write concise sentences across wide, well-spaced lines of text, avoiding capital letters and fonts that are either underlined or italic. Also avoid white backgrounds on computer documents, and break up the text with short paragraphs, bullet points and diagrams. Users of Microsoft Office can even carry out readability analysis on files, using built-in processing software to determine how easy the text is to read for everyone, not just people with dyslexia.