

Independent thinking

When it comes to customer service, independent opticians like us lead the way. That was the conclusion of a detailed report published recently by Which? the UK's leading consumer body. The report's findings were based on a survey completed by over 5,400 Which? members, rating their experiences of eye tests and purchasing glasses or contact lenses over a three-year period.

Conducted in spring 2014, the Which? survey invited members to rate satisfaction with their current practice based on their most recent visit. It also asked whether or not patients would recommend the practice to a friend. When the survey's results were analysed, local independent opticians emerged as clear winners with a customer satisfaction score of 88 per cent. By contrast, the best-performing high street chain only attained a score of 72 per cent, while another received just 59 per cent.

Significantly, independent opticians were the only practices to achieve the highest ratings in customer service and staff skills and were unbeaten on product quality, timekeeping and product choice. Independents even came out on top in terms of aftercare, as Which? reported that local practices were most likely to fix a problem with glasses without accepting any payment.

Another aspect of the Which? survey considered where to purchase new or replacement glasses. The conclusion was that patients should always buy frames and lenses from the practice that conducts their eye tests, as it can be harder to resolve eyecare issues when patients divide their custom between different practices. This was acknowledged by the Optical Confederation's chairman Don Grocott: "The eye examination that determines the correct glasses and contact lenses...provides the essential precise measurements to ensure that new glasses and contacts are exactly right."

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Following the introduction of features previously found only in spectacle lenses, contacts now represent a genuine alternative to glasses.

Flexible friends

Contact lenses have come a long way since their early 18th century origins as glass tubes filled with water, capped by a microscopic lens. Today, millions of people across the UK use a diverse assortment of contact lens varieties, incorporating remarkably sophisticated features and suitable for almost all prescription strengths.

Thanks to advances in manufacturing techniques, modern soft lenses have high water contents to allow plenty of oxygen to reach the eye's surface. Impressive comfort levels mean they can typically be forgotten about after insertion, although their softer composition does result in shorter lifespans than traditional "harder" lenses.

Many people favour daily disposable lenses, which are worn once and then binned without requiring any ongoing maintenance. In tandem with a well-chosen pair of spectacles, these can be an ideal choice for people who prefer not to wear glasses in public but don't need lenses all the time. Monthly contact lenses provide a more affordable alternative to daily disposables, although they do entail a degree of regular cleaning. We can recommend the best option based on your circumstances and preferences.

Technological advances have allowed lens manufacturers to develop contact lenses suitable for almost every spectacle prescription, from toric lenses that fit astigmatic eyes through to multifocals capable of providing crystal-clear vision at varying distances. Patients can obtain different prescription strengths for each eye, and some modern contacts even incorporate UV protection. Following the introduction of features previously found only in spectacle lenses, contacts now represent a genuine alternative to glasses.

Other recent design advances have created contact lenses that can be worn for up to 30 days at a time, without being taken out at all. Similarly, sophisticated orthokeratology lenses help to reshape a patient's corneas while the wearer sleeps. By the next morning, correction-free vision can be enjoyed without any surgery

or eyewear being required. Although these lenses are only available in certain prescription strengths, Ortho K is becoming an increasingly popular option – it represents a completely painless and reversible solution to some vision problems.

Ortho K can benefit children as well as adults, and many regular contact lenses can now be worn from the age of ten. That's great for physically active youngsters, where tough spectacle frames with shatterproof lenses were previously the best option. Indeed, contact lenses have now become an effective rival to sports eyewear for anyone regularly participating in physical exercise. Lenses can also be advantageous in certain professions where spectacle wearing isn't ideal, such as outdoor jobs or working in manufacturing facilities that require safety goggles to be worn.

Health and efficiency

As one of the body's most complex organs, the human eye is a masterpiece of design and efficiency. It's also responsible for providing one of our five senses, as well as playing a vital role in communicating with other people. Keeping our eyes in optimal condition is therefore an essential component of any healthy lifestyle. Fortunately, there are many things you can do to maintain good eye health – especially scheduling regular check-ups here at the practice.

On a general level, many studies have established a link between healthy living and optimal eye health. Exercise improves circulation to the blood vessels in our eyes (and everywhere else) and diet is another crucial factor in maintaining eye health. Daily doses of vitamins A, C and E are recommended alongside lutein-rich foods that can absorb harmful light wavelengths.

Effective eye hygiene is hugely significant in allowing our eyes to operate at full efficiency. An effective daily cleansing routine should dislodge dirt or oils that might cause irritation, and it's also important to avoid touching your eyes unless your hands are clean. Face wipes are great for maintaining cleanliness, while cold compresses can soothe and moisten irritated or dry eyes. Eye drops can also help to alleviate the latter symptom, which may be particularly beneficial to contact lens wearers. Even lenses with high water contents can sometimes cause a gradual drying-out of the eye's surface over time.

If you wear contact lenses, it's essential that you follow your prescribed cleansing or maintenance routine. Daily disposable lenses represent a popular option because they can simply be thrown away at night, but monthly lenses will require some form of cleaning after every wear. Ensure that any supplied solutions or tablets are in date, and always wash your hands thoroughly before touching either the lenses or their storage containers.

Clearly, it's always advisable to minimise the chances of problems occurring in the first place. However, eye-related conditions can sometimes develop due to unforeseen factors – from styes triggered by infected eyelash follicles through to the discomfort caused by blepharitis. If your vision is affected by anything from a surface scratch to smoke exposure, our optometrist(s) will be able to offer expert advice and recommend any necessary treatments.

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In the frame

Compared to the science of professional eye care, choosing new spectacles is very much an artform. There are few hard and fast rules when it comes to selecting the right frames, although this potted guide should help you to make the right choice...

Choosing new glasses is a very subjective and personal decision, which is why our practice stocks a comprehensive variety of options. From rimless rectangles to ostentatious ovals, even frames that look similar at first glance may be markedly different on closer inspection. Start by considering your skin tone and facial shape, to rule out inappropriate designs. Dainty features typically suit smaller curvy frames, whereas a more masculine jawline can be highlighted by a pair of chunky rectangular spectacles. Try to choose designs that draw attention to your eyes while highlighting your eyebrows and cheekbones, rather than obscuring them.

Prescription strength plays an important role in frame selection, with modern slimmed-down lenses making frameless glasses a viable option for increasing numbers of patients. Our experienced staff can offer informed advice about the types of frames most suitable for your individual prescription strength. Although some patients only require vision correction for specific purposes

like reading, many people wear spectacles constantly. Comfortable and practical glasses are therefore worth their weight in gold, although a degree of adjustment can be carried out in-store by our trained specialists to make sure particular frames fit comfortably.

Peripheral vision is an area many people fail to consider when buying glasses, so try to ensure you can't see anything around the lenses. Well-chosen specs should be as easy to forget about as contact lenses, but that won't be the case if the lenses only cover part of your field of vision. This is particularly important for children, which is why trained staff should oversee the selection and fitting of frames for younger patients. Children also outgrow glasses surprisingly quickly (just as they do with shoes and clothes), so regular check-ups are essential to confirm their existing frames still fit and work well. Similarly, routine eye tests ensure adult spectacles are still providing effective vision correction.



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