



Upwardly mobile

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Millions of people throughout the UK now use mobile devices on a daily basis, from smartphones to satnavs. Technology is increasingly carried in our pockets and palms but the human eye wasn't designed to read microscopic text on a three-inch screen, especially while being jolted around on a bus or train. How can we use these increasingly essential devices safely and comfortably?

Some technology is more sympathetic to our eyes than others. A Kindle e-reader, for instance, cleverly mimics the appearance of ink on paper to produce a vision-friendly static display. Conversely, most other mobile devices use LCD technology where individual pixels form a bright (and rapidly-changing) mosaic image. Smaller gadgets can shrink text down to tiny sizes and even though many devices allow users to zoom in more closely, always test new equipment in real-world conditions before purchasing it. Also try to avoid holding screens close to your face since this can potentially cause eye strain, and never stare at them for protracted periods.

Common sense is called for with all mobile devices and you should consult your optician immediately if you develop symptoms like headaches or blurred vision.

Older people may need to wear reading glasses when viewing smaller screens, although some hardware can now be controlled by voice-recognition software like Apple's Siri, or several Android-based alternatives. Try to avoid reflections of light on the screens, which can be dazzling, and consider aftermarket accessories like sunscreens for iPads.

If you have to view a screen for long periods give your vision momentary breaks by focusing on a distant object, blinking frequently, or using eye drops, ideally prescribed by an optometrist or doctor, to avoid your eyes drying out. Treat mobile devices as you would a PC monitor - after all, these gadgets are scaled-down computers and many of the same safe-usage rules apply.

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Although the word cataract is widely used, relatively few people understand the details of this medical condition. Cataracts are a painless yet debilitating occurrence that can damage sight levels if left unchecked and they are the world's most common cause of impaired vision.

Responsible for focusing light onto the retina the lens is a transparent disc behind each pupil, filled primarily with a mixture of water and carefully spaced protein. Cataracts are essentially a change in the protein part of the lens. This causes the lens to lose its transparency. As the transparency diminishes, the retina receives less information resulting in unclear images being relayed to the brain. As proteins clump together they begin to form a mist-like barrier to those light rays, resulting in blurred vision, and this is how a cataract typically develops and becomes noticeable. Another common symptom is a yellow or brown tinge to your vision, while glare and halos around lights provide further indications of the condition's onset.



Cataracts usually develop in older people, although they can also be caused by traumas to the eye such as surgery or injury. Smoking and excessive alcohol consumption can increase someone's risk of developing cataracts as can diabetes, some medication or prolonged exposure to harmful UV rays. However, while cataracts can develop almost unnoticed throughout middle age, people aged 60 and over are increasingly prone to the condition becoming more troublesome.

Optometrists can diagnose cataracts during an eye test. Choosing an appropriate time for surgery depends on various factors, including any other sight-related disorders, but cataracts should ideally be removed when everyday vision becomes noticeably affected and begins to impact on a person's quality of life and their ability to carry out everyday tasks such as driving. Performed as an outpatient procedure, surgeons will remove the cloudy lens under local anaesthetic before permanently installing an artificial replacement known as an intraocular lens or IOL. This procedure is safely and effectively carried out by ophthalmologists on a daily basis but as with all surgery can't be guaranteed risk free. Tissue around the IOL can itself become cloudy over time but this occurrence can be effectively resolved using laser treatment.

Once an operation is declared successful it takes a couple of weeks for the eye to fully recover and patients usually find their sight is fully restored on removal of the patch which covers the eye following the procedure. If surgery is required for the other eye this will be carried out within a few months. Regular eye tests are essential for post-operative patients, and since the IOL lacks the flexibility of the lens it has replaced, most people will need a new prescription for either reading or distance glasses once their sight stabilises.





To anyone who's never worn contact lenses, the thought of replacing familiar and dependable spectacles with these diminutive transparent discs can be quite intimidating. Contact lenses have historically been associated with daily cleaning routines and occasionally falling out at inopportune moments, not to mention the perceived challenges of inserting and removing them.



However, modern lenses have left such issues far behind, and that makes them well worth considering afresh, even for patients who were previously told contacts weren't an option.

Contact lenses are precision-made discs around a centimetre in diameter and concave in shape to fit snugly over the cornea. While rigid gas permeable lenses are manufactured from a Perspex-type polymer, the majority of contact lenses are made out of silicone hydrogel or hydrogel materials – these are known as soft lenses. Both types of lenses allow oxygen to reach the eyes without any difficulty, and thanks to the oxygen permeability of the latest silicon compounds, they can meet the demands of the busy modern lifestyle.

Rigid and soft lenses are available across a wide variety of prescription strengths, making them suitable for patients with nearsightedness, farsightedness or astigmatism. Just like modern glasses bifocal and multifocal contact lenses can provide clear vision at various distances offering a convenient alternative to reading glasses. This is particularly relevant to patients over the age of 45, as the natural onset of presbyopia adversely affects the eye's ability to focus on nearby objects. Your optician can offer expert advice about the best lens types and prescription strengths for your specific circumstances and preferences.

Many years ago, contact lens maintenance was a time-consuming process but modern advances have changed this greatly. Rigid and reusable soft lenses still require brief cleaning and overnight storage in a multipurpose liquid, whereas soft daily disposables must be thrown away after one wear. There is very little risk of medical complications from contact lenses when worn and maintained correctly; techniques for inserting and removing lenses quickly become second nature and wearers typically forget their presence almost immediately after insertion. Other advantages of contact lenses include practicality in bad weather where glasses can potentially mist over or become obscured by raindrops. Contacts are also ideal for people with active lifestyles or sporting interests, and because they move with the eye, covering the whole of the pupil, they provide better peripheral vision than spectacle frames.





Modern daily life places many demands upon our eyes and while most people understand the importance of wearing sunglasses to filter out harmful UV rays, there are many other things that can be done to prevent eye-related damage or discomfort from occurring.

In the workplace, employers have a duty of care regarding the health of their staff and this also encompasses eyesight. Anti-glare monitor screens and diffused lighting are obvious recommendations for desk-based workers and employers have a duty to arrange eye screening checks for all VDU users. People with more active professions should also consider potential hazards such as dust on building sites or gases in manufacturing facilities. Employers must abide by various laws and regulations regarding potentially dangerous substances, with criminal sanctions for breaches of these rules, and employees can expect to be trained on using any available safety equipment.



For example, eye baths are often installed in environments where chemicals are present, and safety glasses or visors must always be used if there's any risk of flying materials being generated, such as when operating lathes - look for well-fitting equipment with BS EN 166 or BS 1542 certification. Workers based outdoors should consider wearing sunglasses with good UV protection, since harmful quantities of ultraviolet light can be present even on cloudy days, and hats or visors can also help.

Similarly, common-sense precautions to protect our eyes should be taken around the home particularly before embarking on DIY activities. Even seemingly benign materials like fibreglass can cause considerable irritation as tiny particles become detached and float through the air, while visual discomfort is particularly common during carpentry work. Protective goggles or safety glasses are ideal for repelling foreign objects and airborne particulates. Showers are better than baths for refreshing tired eyes after undertaking any dusty or smoky work, and avoid rubbing sore or dry eyes which can exacerbate the sources of irritation rather than removing them. If any sight-related symptoms persist, seek advice from an optometrist or ophthalmologist.

Our homes contain many potential irritants and sometimes these can seem quite innocuous. Spicy foods like raw chillies often release chemicals when being handled or cut, and any subsequent contact between fingers and eyes may result in a painful burning sensation. Regular hand-washing can prevent such issues from arising but for chemical or other burns to the eye the best source of relief is to hold the head under running water and then seek advice from an optometrist, GP or A&E, depending on the severity of pain. Other potential sources of irritation can include beauty products like hair dyes, mascara and aerosols, so apply them sparingly and carefully. Finally, millions of people experience sore, itchy eyes as a result of hayfever - this can be quickly alleviated with anti-histamines, but always take medical advice before starting new medicines.

