

# Contact lenses



Professional Excellence in Eye Health



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; and
- rigid 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 new shoes, 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.



Watch our video about contact lenses at [lookafteryoureyes.org/contact-lenses](https://lookafteryoureyes.org/contact-lenses).



If you have any concerns about the health of your eyes, please visit your local optometrist. Optometrists are the eye health specialists in the community.

## 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 if you 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 if you have irregularly shaped eyes or have astigmatism (see over the page). Special types of RGP lenses that you wear only at night, are available to temporarily correct short sight so you that do not need to wear glasses or contact lenses during the day. This treatment is called orthokeratology.

You might find that your eyes feel dry if you wear contact lenses. This may be worse with some types of lenses than others. If you notice this, you may find that changing to a different type of contact lens or reducing the amount of time you wear your lenses will help you. Make sure you mention this when you go for your contact lens check-up so that your optometrist can suggest what to do about it.

As soft lenses are initially more comfortable than RGP lenses, they are ideal for people who only want to wear lenses occasionally.

## 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. As soft contact lenses mould to the shape of your eye, your astigmatism will still be present when you are wearing them. This means that you will need a toric lens to see clearly. Toric lenses correct the rugby ball shape, 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.

Unlike soft lenses, RGP lenses do not mould to the shape of your eyes. This means that 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, spherical RGP lenses may not fit you and 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.

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.



### **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 if you do not wear your lenses very often or 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.

### **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 a serious infection in your eye. You should also avoid showering while wearing your contact 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.

### **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.

### **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. If you find that your lenses are making your eyes look red or feel dry towards the end of the day, ask your optometrist if you can try a different type of lens.

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.

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

## Can I sleep in contact lenses?

Although some contact lenses have been designed to wear overnight, research has shown that sleeping in contact lenses 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 sight so that you can see clearly during the day without glasses or contact lenses. This is called orthokeratology.

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.

## **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.

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

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.

## 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. 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. 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.

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. There is a video on how to insert and remove contact lenses on our website at [lookafteryoureyes.org/contact-lenses](https://lookafteryoureyes.org/contact-lenses).

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.

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

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. Lenses without prescription in them are called zero-powered lenses. 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 that are not coloured.

In the UK it is illegal to sell zero-powered contact lenses unless this is done by or under the supervision of an optometrist, dispensing optician or doctor, so make sure you always buy your lenses from somewhere that does this. Your optometrist will be able to give you more information.

In the UK it is illegal to sell zero-powered contact lenses unless this is done by or under the supervision of an optometrist, dispensing optician or doctor.

## Can I wear make-up with contact lenses?

If you want to wear make-up with contact lenses:

- put your contact lenses in before you put your make-up on;
- wear water-soluble make up, rather than waterproof, so that if it gets into your eye it will dissolve in your tears and not get trapped under your contact lens; and
- do 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. If you wear eyeliner, 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 shape to stop them damaging your eyes, as well as the right prescription to allow you to see clearly. 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 you get them from a reputable source, and that they are 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.

## Can children wear contact lenses?

Children can successfully wear contact lenses. There is no minimum age when contact lenses become suitable, as it will depend upon the particular child. They will need to be mature enough to clean and handle their lenses and broadly understand the risks of wearing contact lenses. Parents or guardians should be involved in the process throughout, so that they can help if needed.

## 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. Your optometrist will tell you how often you need to have check-ups, as this will depend on factors such as the type of lenses that you wear and how long you wear them for. Wherever you buy your lenses you should check whether the price you are paying includes these check-ups.

Your contact lens prescription 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 prescription runs out if you want to continue to buy 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.

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

If you have any concerns about the health of your eyes, please visit your local optometrist. Optometrists are the eye health specialists in the community.

The College of Optometrists is the professional body for optometry. We provide qualifications, guidance and development opportunities for the profession to make sure optometrists provide the best possible care. Our members use MCOptom or FCOptom after their name. Membership of the College shows their commitment to the very highest clinical, ethical and professional standards. Look for the letters MCOptom or FCOptom to see if your optometrist is a member.

Letters after your optometrist's name mean they have received further training. Higher Cert CL means they have a Professional Higher Certificate in Contact Lens Practice. Dip CL means they have a Professional Diploma in Contact Lens Practice.

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

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

Your local optometrist

If you would like this leaflet  
in large print, please email  
**patients@college-optometrists.org.**

The College of Optometrists  
42 Craven Street  
London, WC2N 5NG

Website: [lookafteryoureyes.org](http://lookafteryoureyes.org)

