

What's the Difference Between an Eye Exam and a Contact Lens Exam?

A routine eye exam is not the same as a contact lens exam. For contact lens wearers, a contact lens exam is necessary to ensure the lenses are fitting both eyes properly and that the health of the eyes is not harmed by the contact lenses.

Before we take a closer look at what happens during a contact lens exam, let's talk about normal eye exams.

Comprehensive Eye Exam

A comprehensive eye exam is an important part of caring for your overall health whether you need vision correction or not. By looking into your eyes, your doctor can check for signs of serious health conditions like hypertension and diabetes. During a comprehensive eye exam, your doctor will look for signs of glaucoma, perform tests to check your vision sharpness, determine your prescription strength, examine how your eyes work together, and check the fluid pressure in your eyes. She may also dilate your eyes or photograph your eye with a special camera to see if you have any eye conditions or signs of other serious health conditions.

Why Contact Lens Exams Incur an Additional Fee

If you wear or want contacts, you need a contact lens exam in addition to a comprehensive eye exam. Your eye doctor will perform special tests during a contact lens exam to evaluate your vision with contacts. With the results of those tests, your eye doctor can provide a contact lens prescription that is the right fit for your eyes.

An eyeglass prescription is no substitute for a contact lens exam because the two are very different. An eyeglass prescription measures for lenses that are positioned approximately 12 millimeters from your eyes; whereas a contact lens prescription measures for lenses that sit directly on the surface the eye. An improper fitting or prescription of contacts can damage the health of the eyes.

Some tests involved in contact lens fitting:

Corneal Curvature

In order to assure that the fitting curve of the lens properly fits the curve of your eye, your doctor will measure the curvature of the cornea or front surface of the eye. The curvature is measured with an instrument called a keratometer to determine the appropriate curve for your contact lenses. If you have astigmatism, the curvature of your cornea is not perfectly round and therefore a "toric" lens, which is designed specifically for an eye with astigmatism, would be fit to provide the best vision and lens fit. In certain cases your eye doctor may decide to measure your cornea in greater detail with a mapping of the corneal surface called corneal topography.

Pupil or Iris Size

Your eye doctor may measure the size of your pupil or your iris (the colored area of your eye) with an instrument called a biomicroscope or slit lamp or manually with a ruler or card. This measurement is especially important if you are considering specialized lenses such as Gas Permeable (GP) contacts.

Tear Film Evaluation

One of the most common problems affecting contact lens wear is dry eyes. If the lenses are not kept adequately hydrated and moist, they will become uncomfortable and your eyes will feel dry, irritated and itchy. Particularly if you have dry eye syndrome, your doctor will want to make sure that you have a sufficient tear film to keep the lenses moist and comfortable, otherwise, contact lenses may not be a suitable vision option.

A tear film evaluation is performed by the doctor by putting a drop of liquid dye on your eye and then viewing your tears with a slit lamp or by placing a special strip of paper under the lid to absorb the tears to see how much moisture is produced. If your tear film is weak, your eye doctor may recommend certain types of contact lenses that are more successful in maintaining moisture.

Contact Lens Trial and Prescription

After deciding which pair of lenses could work best with your eyes, the eye doctor may have you try on a pair of lenses to confirm the fit and comfort before finalizing and ordering your lenses. The doctor or assistant would insert the lenses and keep them in for 15-20 minutes before the doctor exams the fit, movement and tearing in your eye. If after the fitting, the lenses appear to be a good fit, your eye doctor will order the lenses for you. Your eye doctor will also provide care and hygiene instructions including how to insert and remove your lenses, how long to wear them and how to store them if relevant.

Follow-up

Your eye doctor may request that you schedule a follow-up appointment to check that your contact lenses are fitting properly and that your eyes are adjusting properly. If you are experiencing discomfort or dryness in your eyes you should visit your eye doctor as soon as possible. Your eye doctor may decide to try a different lens, a different contact lens disinfecting solution or to try an adjustment in your wearing schedule.

It is important that contact lens patients be seen at least once a year by their eye doctor. Annual eye health evaluations by your eye doctor can pick up small problems with your eyes or vision that you can't feel or see. Unlike glasses, contact lenses are foreign objects that rest and move around on the surface of the eye, therefore there is a higher potential for serious eye problems. Additionally, changes in your health, medications, home or work environment can affect the way a contact lens interacts with your eye health.

Why can't contact lenses be sold without a prescription?

Contact lenses are recognized by the FDA as medical devices which need monitoring by your eye doctor. Although the risk of complication to an individual patient is small, it is real. 6% of contact lens wearers will have a complication annually. It is important that diagnosis and treatment of complications happen rapidly to prevent permanent vision loss.

Does my contact lens prescription expire?

Yes. Contact lens prescriptions just like any other prescription will have an expiration date. The expiration date will be one year from the date that the contact lens prescription was determined, unless your eye doctor believes that a short-term prescription is necessary for your eye health. If your eye doctor issues a contact lens prescription for less than one year, he or she will tell you the reason why it is necessary, and will document that reason in your record.

The medical standard of care, as described in the preferred clinical practices of the American Optometric Association (AOA) and the Contact Lens Association of Ophthalmologists (CLAO) recommends routine follow up of all healthy contact lens patients on a six to twelve month basis. Therefore, your eye doctor will advise an exam at least once a year before extending your contact lens prescription. However, at your request, your eye doctor may issue a one time minimal extension for emergency situations.

Whether you wear glasses or contacts, it's a good idea to see if you have new or existing vision problems, and see you eye doctor on an annual basis to see if you need vision correction.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to ask the doctor or our staff.