



Fact Sheet

Optometrists, ophthalmologists and opticians: *A who's who in the world of eye health care*

Knowing who's who in the world of eye health care can be confusing, now that a number of optical stores offer what are called "sight tests," using automated equipment. But make no mistake – a sight test is not a proper eye exam, which only optometrists and ophthalmologists are trained and licensed to perform. The eye health care of British Columbians depends on consumers knowing the difference.

Optometrists

Optometrists and the medical community have long worked together in providing quality primary eye care to British Columbians. Optometrists are doctors of optometry who examine, diagnose, treat, manage and help prevent diseases and disorders affecting the visual system, the eye and related structures. They prescribe medications to treat certain eye conditions, such as infections, inflammations, allergies and injuries. Optometrists also assist in identifying general health conditions including diabetes, high blood pressure and brain tumours, which are often first detected through eye exams. Most doctors of optometry have earned a four-year bachelor of science degree or higher, followed by four years of professional study at a school of optometry.

The British Columbia Association of Optometrists is dedicated to advancing the successful practice of optometry by its members in accordance with the highest standard of patient care, and is the vigilant voice on issues affecting the eye health of all British Columbians. Optometrists are licensed by the College of Optometrists of British Columbia, the profession's province-wide regulatory body.

Ophthalmologists

Ophthalmologists are physicians who, after graduating from medical school, undertake several years of post-graduate training in the diagnosis and treatment of diseases of the eye. Patients require a referral from their optometrist or family physician to visit an ophthalmologist.

Ophthalmology training begins with a broad exposure to general medical problem management, emergency services, pediatric care, and selected exposure to disciplines including, neurology and endocrinology. It also includes an intensive training in clinical settings, with exposure to acute and chronic disease and the long-term treatment of important ocular conditions as glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy, cataracts and degenerative disorders. Extensive surgical experience is also incorporated into the last 24 months of training. Many ophthalmologists continue their training for a further 12 to 24 months in a variety of subspecialties.

Opticians

Opticians are non-medical practitioners who supply, prepare and dispense optical appliances, interpret prescriptions prepared by ophthalmologists and optometrists, and fit, adjust and adapt optical appliances. Opticians are also known as ophthalmic dispensers or dispensing opticians. Opticians in B.C. complete a six-month to one-year education/training program. Once completed, opticians take a national licensing examination that enables them to dispense eyeglasses. Additional education and training is required to dispense contact lenses.