



# Testing the testers

Regular eye tests are vital to your health, but we've found getting a good one can be down to chance

Last year consumers in Britain spent £104 million on eye tests and our survey shows that 86 per cent of members wear glasses or contact lenses. So good-quality eye tests are vital.

An examination should pick up early signs of conditions such as glaucoma, which could leave you blind, as well as other health problems such as high blood pressure, diabetes, or even, as member Kate Denley found, a brain tumour (see right).

However, following our visits to eye-testing practices, our experts found that seven of the 36 prescriptions our researchers were given were inaccurate, and some could have caused headaches and blurred vision. In addition, 17 of the 39 examinations were considered poor or very poor – largely due to missing out important tests.

## Eye tests under the lens

We sent optometry students undercover to 39 practices (see 'Our research', p15) and asked them to report on their experiences. We looked at all types of practice – supermarkets, national and regional chains, and independent practices – to see whether there were differences in their tests.

The students asked for routine eye tests and those who wear glasses said they'd lost them so they could not be used for reference. They all used their specialist knowledge to identify and record the tests carried out, questions asked, the prescription given, and the length and cost of each examination. A panel of expert optometrists then rated each part of each visit from the records as well as the prescriptions.

National and regional chains fared no better than independent practices: we found poor as well as excellent tests at all types of practice. The only significant difference was price; you'll get a cheaper eye test at a national chain.

## Price

National chains charged on average £18.80 for a standard test, for independents it was £21.50, and regional chains asked for £24.80. The cheapest tests we found were £10, at a national chain.

But it doesn't follow that you get what you pay for – there was no link between price and the length or quality of the tests.

The most expensive examination a researcher was given cost £40, although



## BRAIN TUMOUR FOUND AFTER EYE TESTS

**Kate Denley 33,**  
*full-time mum*

A good eye test can do more than improve vision, as Kate found in 2005, when her optometrist's concern led to a brain tumour being discovered.

Kate says: 'I had been having problems with balance and getting muddled for a while and my GP put it down to stress, as a busy mum with five children.'

Then, worried by a near miss in her car, she went to her local Specsavers in Chepstow, where Ashish Sharma, the store director, spent two hours examining her eyes.

He says: 'I was concerned and after explaining the tests and findings I sent Kate for further tests.'

At the hospital, staff looked at Kate's eyes and asked why she was there.

She says: 'Had I not had a letter from the optometrist they would have sent me home. On reading it they sent me to have a scan and discovered that I had a mass in my brain that was causing hydrocephalus (sometimes called water on the brain).'

Kate has been having radiotherapy since and her tumour is beginning to shrink: 'If it hadn't been for my optometrist the tumour may have gone undiagnosed for a lot longer. On my next visit to the optician I took him a bottle of wine to say a big thank you.'

Mr Sharma adds: 'You don't expect anything to be wrong when you're young and healthy, so it's all the more important to get your eyes checked regularly. I'm pleased Kate came to see me – it's all part of the job.'

## Who's looking at you?

**Optician or optometrist? We explain who you'll meet at a practice and what they do, and highlight other eye specialists**

■ **Optometrists** examine eyes and prescribe and dispense glasses or contact lenses. They can recommend some other treatments and are trained to recognise eye diseases.

■ **Dispensing opticians** advise on the fit of glasses and with further training they deal with the fitting of contact lenses.

■ **Optical assistants** advise on products and may do pre- and post-examination tests.

■ **Ophthalmologists** are doctors specialising in eye disease, treatment and surgery. They're normally based in hospitals, where other specialists may include ophthalmic nurses and medical practitioners, and orthoptists.

## WHAT'S IN AN EYE TEST?

**Tests that should be carried out on you during an examination vary, but the following will be done by good optometrists; they work quickly, though, and increasingly use automated machines, so you may not be able to spot every one**

An optometrist should ask the reason for your visit and, as mentioned earlier, about eye problems, general health, family history of eye health and lifestyle, including computer and car use as well as hobbies (see 'Communication', p14).

Some practices offer a pre-screen, where a technician will carry

out initial tests before you see an optometrist. These can include tests such as retinoscopy and those for glaucoma (see below). With this condition the optic nerve is damaged, which can result in major visual impairment, but people rarely experience symptoms before significant damage has occurred.

### VISION TESTS

#### Visual acuity

**For** Tests vision and measures your prescription.

**What happens** A chart is used to check what you can see with each eye, at a distance with letters of decreasing size on a wall or screen and close-up through paragraphs of differently sized text.



**What happens** You look at a red and a green target or a spot of light in the distance, while the optometrist shines a light in your eyes to see how it reflects on the back of them. This can be done with an autorefractor – a machine you sit at that measures your prescription.

#### Subjective refraction

**For** Tests for difficulties seeing at a distance and measures your prescription.



**What happens** You wear frames into which the optometrist inserts different lenses and asks which make it clearest for you to read a letter chart.

#### Reading addition

**For** Tests for difficulties seeing close up and measures your prescription.

**What happens** Similar to subjective refraction, but uses a close-up chart to check whether you need different lenses for close-up work.



#### Retinoscopy

**For** Checks for short- or long-sightedness and astigmatism (see 'Tests carried out', p14).



### EYE MOVEMENT TESTS

#### Cover test

**For** Checks how well your eye muscles work and whether you have a squint.

**What happens** You look at targets far away and close up with one eye covered.



#### Motility

**For** Checks that all your eye muscles are working properly.



**What happens** You follow a target with your eyes and report any double vision, pain or difficulty following the target.

#### Near point of convergence

**For** Tests whether your eye muscles work normally.

**What happens** A target is moved closer to your eye until you go cross eyed or see double.



### HEALTH TESTS

#### Ophthalmoscopy

**For** Detects problems such as glaucoma, high blood pressure or diabetes.

**What happens** The optometrist shines light in your eye as you look at a target and move your eyes in various directions. Alternatively, they might examine your eye with a type of microscope.



#### Tonometry

**For** Tests for glaucoma, usually if you're over 40 or if there's a family history.

**What happens** The optometrist will puff air into your eye to measure the pressure. Alternatively, they might drop yellow dye into your eye and shine a blue light on it.



#### Visual field

**For** Checks field of vision.

**What happens** You sit at a machine looking straight ahead and indicate when you see dim lights flash in your peripheral vision.





this was in Scotland where eye tests are often free for most people (see 'Checklist', p15) and regulations brought in last year mean that optometrists can carry out only 20 examinations a day.

Where examinations are paid for by the health service, in Scotland the NHS pays optometrists £36 for a standard examination and may pay a further £21 for supplementary tests, while in the rest of the UK it pays £18.85 per examination no matter what tests are included.

The cost of carrying out an examination depends on rent, equipment and professional rates, but our experts estimate most cost about £36, so they're usually loss leaders and most income is generated through sales of products.

## Accuracy

Some prescriptions given to researchers could have caused eye-health problems, according to our experts. For example, one was given an under-corrected prescription, which would have left his vision blurred in the distance. Another's prescription was too strong and would probably have led to headaches and eyestrain.

The two researchers who don't need to wear glasses or contact lenses were told this at each practice, but they should still have received their results on prescriptions. In three of these 16 visits they did not.

Prescriptions can be difficult to understand, so it's hard to know whether there's a mistake with yours. The variation in formats used by optometrists means similar prescriptions can look different. One element – the cylinder reading – can be written in a negative or positive format. One of our experts said: 'It can be confusing as the prescriptions look very different in the

## PAID MORE THAN £300 FOR BLURRY SPECS

**Phill Harrington 45,**  
*HGV driver*

As he's a professional driver it's crucial that Phill has comfortable glasses that make his vision just right.

But after an examination with one national chain he says his specs weren't right at all: 'I ordered expensive glasses, for £330, and was told they'd be ready in five days. Three weeks later, I received a pair of what I thought were the blurriest specs ever.'

Phill, from Oldham, went back to the practice and

was tested by another optometrist, who said the first prescription was wrong.

He says: 'After weeks of arguing, and chasing of the branch manager, with ultimatums and threatening with *Which?* magazine, I got my money back.'

'I then saw an advert for an online optician, and ordered a new pair with what appeared to be a similar standard of frames for £17. They arrived three days later; they're perfect, with full spring hinges and coated lenses. A bargain.'

two formats. I think the profession should standardise on the negative format so that patients won't have this problem.'

## Tests carried out

There are numerous tests an optometrist could do during an examination, but which you should have depends on age, ethnic background and eye health – you'd never need them all.

Some tests assess vision, the prescription you need and whether you require glasses, while others check for eye movement, signs of eye disease or general health problems. Our experts identified the key tests needed (see 'What's in an eye test?', p13) and examinations that didn't include them were rated as poor.

Just one national chain's practice and one independent optometrist were awarded top

## Only two practices got top marks for the range of tests carried out

marks for tests carried out. Both practices checked how well the muscles in the eyes work together and eye health as well as determining the strength of glasses needed.

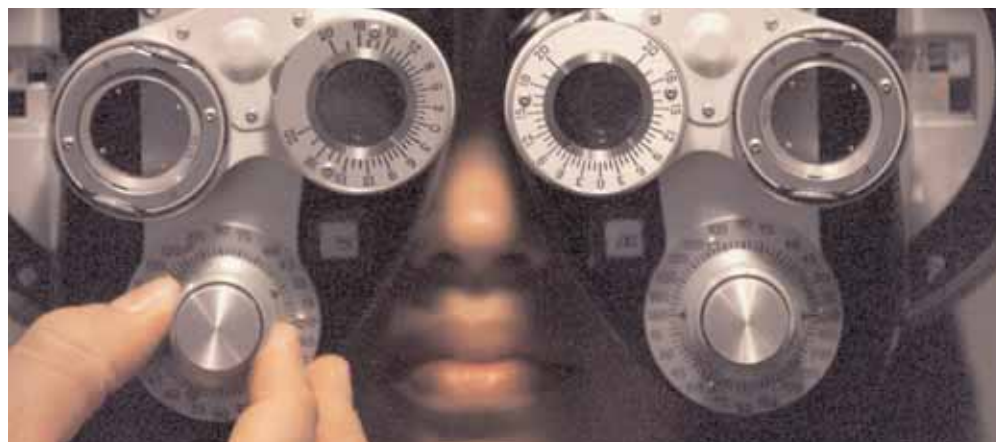
But 27 of the eye examinations failed to check how well eye muscles worked together. One of our experts said: 'A check to see whether a patient has a squint, or whether two eyes work together properly, is an important part of an eye test and it's disappointing that so many exams did not even include one test to assess this.'

Unsurprisingly, two of the seven examinations that resulted in poor prescriptions did not include essential tests. One missed out retinoscopy, which measures the strength of glasses needed, so the prescription was totally dependent on the patient's responses and judgment on how different lenses affected their vision.

Another did not use the Jackson cross-cylinder test, which is vital to measure astigmatism – a rugby-ball shaped eye – which can mean your vision is blurred at a distance and close up. This surprised the student researcher, who said: 'He just swung the cylinder (the lens that corrects astigmatism) back and forth until I said it was clear.'

## Communication

Before your eye test, an optometrist should ask several questions to establish risk factors and get an indication of problems. Questions about your eye and general health, and that of close family, are crucial. They should also ask about lifestyle – computer users are more prone to certain



**Which lens is best? Subjective refraction is a key test you should have during an examination**



eye problems and it's useful to know if you drive or play sports; for safety, some sports should be played using glasses and others with contact lenses.

In our visits, ten optometrists failed to ask whether our researchers had experienced headaches and six didn't ask about family history. One of our experts said: 'The lack of questioning about family history is particularly poor and is indicative of rushed exams.'

Your optometrist must, under the Opticians Act, hand over your prescription, which you can use to buy glasses or contact lenses from any dispensing optician, including online companies and abroad (see 'Checklist', right). After four visits, researchers had to ask for their prescription.

At the end of 11 visits, the researchers weren't advised about when their next examination should be.

### Time taken

Our experts say an eye test should last 20 minutes at the very least. If you're older or

at risk of eye problems due to family history or ethnic origin, it should be at least 30 minutes.

On average eye exams during our visits took 23 minutes, although all our researchers were under 60.

Fourteen visits took less than 20 minutes; the quickest two were ten minutes – certainly not long enough for thorough examinations, according to our experts.

The longest examination took 50 minutes, including a pre-screen and follow-up tests. This was at a national chain, although our experts judged that some of the follow-up tests proved unnecessary in this case.

All eight visits in Scotland took 20 minutes or more, which may be down to the restrictions on the number of examinations an optometrist can perform each day.

### Which? says

We saw a wide range in quality, accuracy and thoroughness in our visits, no matter what the size of practice.

The problem is that unless you're quite knowledgeable about optometry, it's extremely difficult to tell whether you're getting all the eye tests that you need and to a sufficient standard.

One check you can make is to ask how long an examination might take. If you're told less than 20 minutes, or less than 30 minutes if you're older or have explained that you're at a high risk of eye problems, book elsewhere.

But it's up to the regulator to put more measures in place to ensure that poor care doesn't slip through the net. We think that the General Optical Council (GOC) should carry out regular spot checks.

The GOC has sanctions at its disposal if it does encounter bad practice, including imposing conditions, issuing fines or removing optometrists from its register, but if it does not proactively check eye tests, consumers will continue to be at risk.

## Checklist

We clarify what you need to know about eye care

### Free eye tests

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland you're entitled to a free NHS eye test if you're under 16, under 19 and in full-time education, aged 60 or over, have certain medical conditions or receive certain benefits.

In Scotland, adults aged between 16 and 60 are entitled to a free test every two years. Children and older people, and those with certain conditions or a family history of them, are entitled to more frequent free eye examinations.

Also, across the UK, if you use a visual display unit (VDU) at work you can claim the cost of a standard test from your employer, and if you need glasses specifically for VDU work, your employer should pay for a standard pair. Check entitlements with your optometrist.

### Buying online

You can use your prescription anywhere and buy glasses more cheaply online, but you may not be able to check the fit, though some companies will send dummy pairs to try. Measure your glasses and compare them with measurements on the site. With designer glasses, try them on the high street to see whether you like them.

If glasses are custom made to your prescription you won't have the usual right to cancel provided by the Distance Selling Regulations. If they're

faulty you should be able to return them but rules may be different for businesses outside the EU. So if you're going to spend more than £100, consider using your credit card as you may be able to claim from the credit card company. Always check terms and conditions.

### Making a complaint

If your complaint concerns the service you received – for instance, if you think you were overcharged – contact the Optical Consumer Complaints Service at [www.opticalcomplaints.co.uk](http://www.opticalcomplaints.co.uk) or on 020 7407 3990. If your complaint is about conduct – for instance, you don't think the optician did the correct tests – contact the General Optical Council at [www.optical.org](http://www.optical.org) or on 020 7580 3898.

### Driving

All drivers must be able to read a car number plate from 20.5 metres, or 20 metres where narrower characters of 50mm are displayed. You have to prove you can do this when you take your practical test, but then it's up to you to ensure you meet the standard.

You should inform the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency of any medical condition that might affect your ability to drive or you face a fine of £1,000. Email [eftd@dvla.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:eftd@dvla.gsi.gov.uk) or call 0870 600 0301.

## OUR RESEARCH

Between May and June 2007, five optometry students visited 39 practices in mid and northern England and Scotland. Also in May, 2,405 Which? online panel members took part in our survey about eye care.

### HAVE YOUR SAY

Have you had experiences similar to those of our case studies Kate and Phill? Share your stories of eye care and products by emailing [letters@which.co.uk](mailto:letters@which.co.uk) or write to us at Which?, PO Box 44, Hertford X SG14 1SH.