



Shopping around – both on the high street and online – could save you £50+ on your next pair of glasses or contacts

Buying glasses and contact lenses

IN BRIEF

In this report we help you to:

- save money on your next pair of glasses or contacts
- decide whether glasses or contacts are best for you
- choose glasses that suit your face

If you think that paying through the nose will get you the best quality or most fashionable glasses – think again.

As our research – and Which? member Anthony Lamb (see ‘I saved on specs online’, opposite) – shows, shopping around can save you a considerable amount of money, whatever your needs or style.

Our trawl of the high street and the internet revealed a difference of £79 on one pair of glasses and £52.50 on three months’ supply of contact lenses. But before you get out your credit card, you will need to decide which product you want.

For those who are new to needing corrective lenses and those considering a change, we’ve asked experienced opticians for their advice on how to decide between glasses or contacts. If you do want a pair of glasses, we’ve also used expert knowledge to bring you tips on choosing the right frames according to the shape of your face and its features.

We also give you the lowdown on eye tests and contact lens check ups – turn to p32 to find out why you need them, and what they involve. If you’re hoping to ditch corrective lenses altogether, read

our report on laser eye surgery from p26 to find out what happened when we went undercover to test laser eye surgery consultations.

How much can you save?

A pair of glasses, hard contact lenses or a year’s supply of soft contact lenses can cost hundreds of pounds, but you can cut down on costs by shopping around.

In our snapshot research in central London, we picked a pair of designer glasses – Bench BCH-09 – and checked out the price with several sellers.

On the high street, we found the pair at two chains. They were on ‘special offer’ at Boots for £90 compared with £120 at Optical Express, but it’s online that we found real savings.

The Bench glasses were available at seven sites but, this time, boots.co.uk was the priciest, at £124, while they cost just £45 at selectyourspec.com – saving you up to £79.

We also found savings on contact lenses. For three months’ supply of Acuvue Oasys contact lenses, the best high street price was at an independent, for

£45. The cheapest high street chain charged £60, while the most expensive was Dollond & Aitchison (£90).

Once again, we found better savings online. Boots.co.uk was the most expensive, at more than £59, and Contactforlenses.com was the cheapest, at £37.50 (including delivery) – £52.50 cheaper than the most expensive high-street price.



Online vs high street

While prices for glasses and contact lenses were cheaper online overall, this wasn’t true in every case. The glasses were more expensive at some online retailers than the cheapest high street price at Boots (£90). Similarly, the contact lenses were pricier at Lensway.co.uk (£51) and Contactsuniverse.co.uk (£50) as well as at Boots.co.uk.

So the high street is certainly still worth trying – and you may prefer the personal customer service, as it allows you to discuss your needs. For example, you may not be sure if it’s OK to swap between brands of contact lenses – you need to discuss this with an optometrist and have



I SAVED ON SPECS ONLINE

Anthony Lamb 61, retired telecoms executive

Anthony knows exactly what he wants in a pair of glasses – varifocals with photochromatic lenses (those that turn into sunglasses), and flexible frames so they don't break easily. Such glasses don't come cheap, but he has managed to save hundreds of pounds by getting his last two pairs online – both have been exactly what he wanted, and were delivered on time.

His most recent glasses cost £142.75 – around half of what he'd expect to pay on the high street. Anthony's only problem has come while getting an eye test at Boots. The store refused to measure his pupillary distance, needed for fitting, unless he bought glasses there – so he measured it himself.

'I'd never go back to paying the huge high-street prices,' he says.



a trial of possible new lens types. Without seeing a professional, you should stick to the same brand and lens on your contact lens prescription. No matter how similar, new brands and lens materials can fit differently and interact differently with the moisture in your eyes.

When you receive your contact lenses, check that the packaging has exactly the same specifications as your contact lens prescription, including the manufacturer, the lens name and material, as well as the same lens diameter, base curve and power.

There are also fitting issues with glasses, but there are steps you can take that will help if you want to buy them online.

You'll need to know your pupillary distance – the distance between the centres of your pupils. If an optician refuses to measure this (see 'I saved on specs online', above), you'll need a ruler and a mirror – many online glasses retailers have instructions on how to do this. Or, if you have a particular set of frames in mind, you can try these on at an optician's first.

Resolving problems

Despite the good deals to be had online, be aware that your legal rights to a refund aren't as strong as they might be with other products. The Distance Selling Regulations usually allow you to change your mind about goods bought online but, because glasses are made to a certain prescription, you don't get an automatic right to a refund. Check the site's returns policy before buying. Getting a refund on glasses bought from a high-street optician also depends on its returns policy.

Glasses or contact lenses?

If you're new to corrective lenses, or unhappy with those you currently use, you may want to consider switching from glasses to contact lenses, or vice versa



Why wear glasses?

- A pair of glasses will, ideally, last for years
- You're less likely to lose them than contacts
- They're easier to take off and put on
- Typically less glare when driving at night than contact lenses
- No risk of infection
- Provide eye protection, as long as lenses are plastic or polycarbonate
- Better in dusty atmospheres
- Varifocal and bifocal glasses generally provide significantly better overall vision than varifocal and bifocal contact lenses
- Usually better for people with dry eyes
- Glasses can be a fashion item – and there's now more choice of frames than ever.



Why wear contact lenses?

- Good for playing sport
- Better in wet weather as they do not steam up
- Provide a wider field of vision
- Some prefer the way they look without glasses
- No problem with allergies to metals in glasses
- You can wear off-the-shelf sunglasses
- Better correction for people whose eyes have a large difference in prescription
- No 'nose marks' or temple indentations from heavy or poorly fitting glasses
- Easier to get a replacement if lost or damaged
- If one hard contact lens breaks, you might be able to wear just the remaining one for a short time, though tasks such as driving or negotiating steps might be difficult.



I have problems putting things in my eyes. What help can an optician give me if I want contacts?

All new contact lens wearers are given insertion and removal appointments. For some patients this may take 10 minutes, and for others it may take numerous visits. There are lots of different techniques, including holding the head in different positions and looking in different directions, that work for different people.

With faults, however, legal rights still apply. If the glasses or contacts are not fit for purpose on arrival, you should return them within a reasonable time – usually around three or four weeks. If they develop a fault later that is not considered normal wear and tear, the retailer must either repair or replace the item.

With high-street opticians, if your problem is not resolved, you can contact the Optical Consumer Complaints Service.

Other issues with new glasses

Minor discomfort with new glasses can be part of the process of adapting to them – a high-street optometrist should advise you of such issues, and problems can often be sorted out with minor adjustments. More serious issues can include: double vision, vision being more blurred compared with your old glasses; or reading glasses providing clear vision at the wrong distance.

While we've found that you can make massive savings by buying your next pair of glasses or set of contact lenses online, the key is to do your research and shop around – both on the internet and on the high-street – to make sure you get the best possible deal.

Contacts

Federation of Manufacturing Opticians
020 7298 5123; www.fmo.co.uk

Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland
www.hscni.net

Health of Wales Information Service
www.wales.nhs.uk

NHS Choices (England) www.nhs.uk

NHS 24 (Scotland) www.nhs24.com

Optical Consumer Complaints Service
08448005071

Royal College of Ophthalmologists
020 7935 0702; www.rcophth.ac.uk

Which Legal

If your latest batch of contact lenses break too easily or your glasses bought online don't match your prescription, Which? Legal Service can advise you on your rights. Which? members can get a year's membership for just £26 until the end of April. Call **01992 822 828** or visit www.whichlegalservice.co.uk for details.

which? Legal Service

How to choose a pair of glasses

Picking the best frames for your face

Selecting your specs is partly a matter of personal taste, but you should also consider what frames match up with your facial features.

Look at the shape of your face first of all – is it oval, oblong, round, square, base-down triangle, base-up triangle, or diamond? Select frame shapes that are opposite to your face shape – so a person with a round face should go for square frames.

You can also use a pair of glasses to draw attention to your best features – if you have prominent cheekbones, for example, select a frame with a square shape at the temples.

Check how frames sit on your face

You should also look for frames that have the same proportions as your face – a wide face requires a wide frame, and a long face needs a deep frame. They should be no wider than the broadest part of your face, but frames that are too narrow will make your eyes appear closer together.

Glasses should sit no higher than the line of your eyebrows, and the lower rims of the frames should not rest on your cheeks.

A frame with a low-set bridge will make a long nose appear shorter, while a high-set bridge will have the opposite effect. If your eyes are close together, pick a thin or clear bridge to add width. A coloured bridge will make wide-set eyes appear closer together.



Other things to look for

If your prescription is ± 3.50 or higher, lenses can be thick and heavy, so you may want to splash out a little more on higher-index plastics, which are thinner and lighter. Plastic lenses are half the weight of glass lenses and are much safer, but they do scratch easily. Scratch-resistant coatings reduce the chances of the lenses scratching, though they will not prevent it completely.

Most glasses look much better with an anti-reflection (same as anti-glare) coat and it can improve vision for night driving. UV400 coats are particularly useful for people who have cataract and age-related macular degeneration or a family history of either, as UV radiation is one of the known causes of these diseases. A UV-blocker can also slightly improve the vision of people with cataracts.

EYE TESTS AND CONTACT LENS CHECK-UPS

Getting your eyes tested

With eye tests, it's often a case of getting what you pay for, as more expensive tests are likely to be more comprehensive.

If you receive certain benefits such as Pension Credit, you should be entitled to an NHS voucher for a free eye test and money off glasses or contact lenses. Go to the website of the NHS or Health and Social Care in your country to find out if you are eligible.

You can also find opticians in your area through these websites. For high-street opticians in your area recommended by other Which? members, try www.which-local.co.uk.

Contact lens check-ups

Regular contact lens check-ups are important, because you may develop symptomless problems which can only be identified at a check-up. Some problems, if left unchecked, may cause you to have to stop wearing contact lenses.



A contact lens check-up should include a case history of contact lens wear, a measurement of vision to check whether the power of the contact lenses is adequate and an assessment of the contact lens fit and movement.

They will also conduct a tear quality assessment and examine your eyelids and lashes and discuss with you whether the contact lenses need changing in any way.

You will have to pay for each contact lens check-up, though some high-street opticians will include free check-ups when you buy contact lenses from them.