

What is an ophthalmologist?

What is an optometrist?



This leaflet contains information on the role of an:

- Ophthalmologist
- Optometrist
- Therapeutically endorsed optometrist

so that you can make an informed decision regarding the management of your glaucoma and other medical eye conditions.

Practice Details

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Understanding the role of an
ophthalmologist
optometrist

What is an ophthalmologist?

An ophthalmologist ('eye doctor' or 'eye surgeon') is a medical doctor, who has undertaken additional specialist training in the diagnosis and both medical and surgical management of disorders of the eye and visual systems. This additional training makes them a medical specialist just like a cardiologist, anaesthetist, gastroenterologist or gynaecologist.

An ophthalmologist in Australia and New Zealand is required to have undertaken a minimum of 12 years of training, comprising:

- 6-7 years at a medical school, graduating with a degree in medicine
- 2 years (minimum) as a newly qualified doctor undertaking basic medical training
- 5 years of ophthalmic specialist training and successful completion of examinations set by The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists (RANZCO). This includes up to 12,000 hours of training including surgery.

What is an optometrist?

Training to be an optometrist in Australia and New Zealand comprises:

- 5-7 years at university leading to a degree in optometry. This includes the study of the visual system, refracting for glasses and contact lenses and also diagnosing common eye conditions.
- 1 year of pre-registration experience.

What does an ophthalmologist do?

An ophthalmologist diagnoses eye disorders, and manages them with medical and surgical treatment and regular monitoring. Ophthalmologists often lead an eye care team, including optometrists, to ensure patients receive the most appropriate care. They consider your full medical status.

What does an optometrist do?

Optometrists examine eyes, give advice on visual problems, and prescribe and fit glasses or contact lenses. If eye disease is detected, an optometrist should refer the patient to an ophthalmologist for further management.

What about a therapeutically endorsed optometrist?

Some practicing optometrists have undertaken an additional 50 hours observing ophthalmologists to become therapeutically endorsed. This means they can prescribe some drugs, including medical eye drops. Recent optometry graduates have limited training in pharmacology and medical management of eye diseases. They have gained therapeutic endorsement as part of their undergraduate degree but this training includes only limited clinical experience, and they do not have general medical training.

Why does the difference matter?

The difference in the breadth of training and clinical exposure means ophthalmologists have more comprehensive experience in detecting and managing eye disorders, as well as understanding patients general medical wellbeing. Optometrists are trained in screening for serious eye conditions such as glaucoma, but they are not doctors.

If an optometrist detects changes in your vision that could be a sign of something serious they should refer you to an ophthalmologist. Similarly, if you have a history of eye disorders or notice a sudden change in your vision, you should ask your GP or optometrist for a referral to an ophthalmologist immediately.



Some recent changes...

In the past, the Optometry Board of Australia, which regulates Australia's optometrists, allowed therapeutically endorsed optometrists to independently diagnose, initiate treatment and manage patients with glaucoma without consulting an ophthalmologist.

However, in late 2014 these guidelines were modified so that following an initial diagnosis of glaucoma, optometrists are required to refer a patient on to an ophthalmologist within four months for confirmation of the diagnosis and to establish a management plan.

This collaborative care approach recognises that ophthalmologists provide specialist oversight for glaucoma patients to ensure they are using the best possible treatment options and the disease is being properly monitored, similar to the way a cardiologist would work collaboratively with a GP to monitor a heart condition.

The Australian Medical Association, Australian Society of Ophthalmologists and The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists endorse this message:

If you are at risk of developing glaucoma or are currently being treated for glaucoma, ensure you are visiting an ophthalmologist after any initial diagnosis by an optometrist or GP.