

## Optometrist



### Career Description

Doctors of optometry (ODs) are the primary health care professionals for the eye. Optometrists examine, diagnose, treat, and manage diseases, injuries, and disorders of the visual system, the eye, and associated structures as well as identify related systemic conditions affecting the eye.

Doctors of optometry prescribe medications, low vision rehabilitation, vision therapy, spectacle lenses, and contact lenses and perform certain surgical procedures.

Optometrists counsel their patients regarding surgical and nonsurgical options that meet their visual needs related to their occupations, avocations, and lifestyles.

An optometrist has completed preprofessional undergraduate education in a college or university and 4 years of professional education at a college of optometry, leading to the doctor of optometry (OD) degree. Some optometrists complete an optional residency in a specific area of practice.

Optometrists are eye health care professionals state-licensed to diagnose and treat diseases and disorders of the eye and visual system.



### Employment Characteristics

Most optometrists are in general practice. Some specialize in work with the elderly, children, or partially sighted persons who need specialized visual devices.

Others develop and implement ways to protect workers' eyes from on-the-job strain or injury. Some specialize in contact lenses, low vision, sports vision, or vision therapy. A few teach optometry, perform research, or consult.

Most optometrists are private practitioners who also handle the business aspects of running an office, such as developing a patient base, hiring employees, keeping paper and electronic records, and ordering equipment and supplies. Optometrists who operate franchise optical stores also may have some of these duties.

Optometrists work in places—usually their own offices—that are clean, well lighted, and comfortable. Most full-time optometrists work about 40 hours a week. Many work weekends and evenings to suit the needs of patients, and are increasingly available for emergency calls as well.



### Salary

According to the 2007 American Optometric Association Economic Survey, the mean income from self-employment per optometrist was \$175,329. The same survey revealed the following:

- Self-employed optometrists in individual, partnership, and group practice continue to have a larger total individual mean net income than their counterparts employed in other settings
- Practitioners in midsized (three- to five-person) groups have the highest average net income at \$179,205
- Those in small (two-person) practices earn an average of \$176,944
- Individual practitioners earn an average of \$134,094
- Practitioners in large partnerships or groups (six or more) earn an average of \$159,300
- Practitioners associated with optical chains earn an average of \$100,704

For more information, refer to [www.ama-assn.org/go/hpsalary](http://www.ama-assn.org/go/hpsalary).



### Employment Outlook

Employment of optometrists is expected to grow as fast as average for all occupations through 2016, in response to the vision care needs of a growing and aging population. As baby boomers age, they will be more likely to visit optometrists and ophthalmologists because of the onset of vision problems in middle age, including those resulting from the extensive use of computers. The demand for optometric services also will increase because of growth in the oldest age group, with its increased likelihood of cataracts, glaucoma, diabetes, and hypertension. Greater recognition of the importance of vision care, along with rising personal incomes and growth in employee vision care plans, also will spur job growth.

Employment of optometrists would grow more rapidly were it not for anticipated productivity gains that will allow each optometrist to see more patients. These expected gains stem from greater use of optometric assistants and other support personnel, who will reduce the amount of time optometrists need with each patient. Also, laser surgery that can correct some vision problems is available, and although optometrists still will be needed to provide pre-operative and postoperative care for laser surgery patients, patients who successfully undergo this surgery may not require optometrists to prescribe glasses or contacts for several years.

In addition to growth, the need to replace optometrists who retire or leave the occupation for another reason will create employment opportunities.



### Educational Programs

**Award, Length.** The Doctor of Optometry (OD) degree requires the completion of a 4-year program at an accredited school or college of optometry.

**Prerequisites.** Each optometry school has slightly different admission requirements. Some schools or colleges require a 4-year undergraduate degree, and many others strongly recommend it. All require at least 3 years of undergraduate study at an accredited college or university. Most optometry students hold a bachelor's or higher degree.

Admission requirements for most schools include general courses in biology, physics, and chemistry, in addition to organic chemistry, biochemistry, biology, microbiology (all with labs), calculus, statistics, English, psychology, social sciences, and other humanities. Because a strong background in science is important, many applicants to optometry school major in a science such as biology or chemistry, while other applicants major in another subject and take many science courses offering laboratory experience. Applicants must take the Optometry Admissions Test (OAT), which is designed to measure general academic ability and comprehension of scientific information.

Admission to optometry school is competitive. Applicants are encouraged to take the examination well in advance of intended enrollment. Most applicants take the test after their sophomore or junior year after taking courses in biology, general and organic chemistry, and physics. Some applicants are accepted to optometry school after 3 years of college and complete their bachelor's degree while attending optometry school.

Most schools also consider an applicant's exposure to optometry, such as becoming acquainted with at least one optometrist, as being of vital importance. Generally, schools and colleges of

optometry admit students who have demonstrated strong academic commitment and who exhibit the potential to excel in deductive reasoning, interpersonal communication, and empathy.

**Curriculum.** Optometry programs include courses in the basic health sciences (anatomy, physiology, pathology, biochemistry, pharmacology, and public health), optics, and the vision sciences, as well as laboratory and clinical training in diagnosing and treating eye disease.

**Residency and Advanced Training.** Optometrists wishing to teach or conduct research may study for a master's or PhD degree in areas emphasizing the visual and ocular system. One-year post-graduate clinical residency programs are available for optometrists who wish to obtain advanced clinical competence, although residency training is not required to be licensed as an optometrist. Areas for residency programs include the following:

- Primary eye care
- Cornea and contact lenses
- Geriatric optometry
- Pediatric optometry
- Low vision rehabilitation
- Vision therapy and rehabilitation
- Ocular disease
- Refractive and ocular surgery
- Community health optometry



### Licensure, Certification, Registration

All states and the District of Columbia require that optometrists be licensed. Applicants for a license must have a Doctor of Optometry degree from an accredited optometry school and must pass both a written national board examination and a national or state clinical board examination. The written and clinical examinations of the National Board of Examiners in Optometry usually are taken during the student's academic career. Many states also require applicants to pass an examination on relevant state laws. Licenses are renewed every 1 to 3 years, with continuing education credits required for renewal in all states.



### Inquiries

#### Education, Careers, Resources

American Optometric Association, Career Guidance Materials  
243 North Lindbergh Blvd, Floor 1  
St Louis, MO 63141-7881  
800 365-2219  
[www.aoa.org](http://www.aoa.org)

Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry  
6110 Executive Blvd, Suite 420  
Rockville, MD 20852  
301 231-5944  
[www.opted.org](http://www.opted.org)

#### Licensure

National Board of Examiners in Optometry  
200 S College Street, #1920  
Charlotte, NC 28202  
[www.optometry.org](http://www.optometry.org)

#### Program Accreditation

Accreditation Council on Optometric Education, American Optometric Association  
243 North Lindbergh Blvd  
St Louis, MO 63141-7881  
800 365-2219  
[www.theacoe.org](http://www.theacoe.org)  
E-mail: [ACOE@aoa.org](mailto:ACOE@aoa.org)

*Note:* Adapted in part from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, US Department of Labor, *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, 2008-2009 Edition, Optometrists, on the Internet at [www.bls.gov/oco/ocos073.htm](http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos073.htm).