

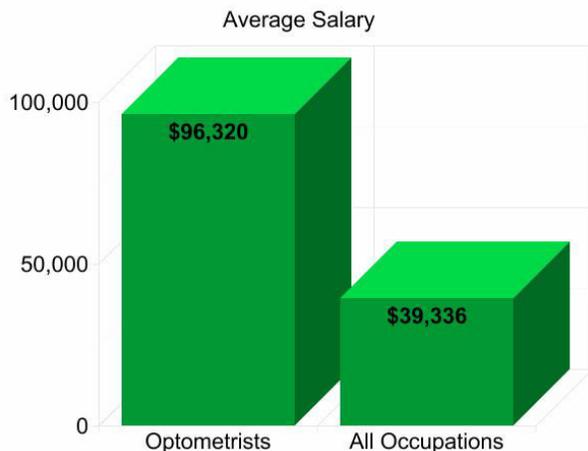
Optometrists

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WHAT THEY DO

Optometrists, also known as doctors of optometry, or ODs, are the main providers of vision care. They examine people's eyes to diagnose vision problems, such as nearsightedness and farsightedness, and they test patients' depth and color perception and ability to focus and coordinate the eyes. Optometrists may prescribe eyeglasses or contact lenses, or they may provide other treatments, such as vision therapy or low-vision rehabilitation.

Optometrists also test for glaucoma and other eye diseases and diagnose conditions caused by systemic diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure, referring patients to other health practitioners as needed. They prescribe medication to treat vision problems or eye diseases, and some provide preoperative and postoperative care to cataract patients, as well as to patients who have had corrective laser surgery. Like other physicians, optometrists encourage preventative measures by promoting nutrition and hygiene education to their patients to minimize the risk of eye disease.



Although most work in a general practice as a primary care optometrist, some optometrists prefer to specialize in a particular field, such as contact lenses, geriatrics, pediatrics, or vision therapy. As a result, an increasing number of optometrists are forming group practices in which each group member specializes in a specific area while still remaining a full scope practitioner. For example, an expert in low-vision rehabilitation may help legally blind patients by custom fitting them with a magnifying device that will enable them to read. Some may specialize in occupational vision, developing ways to protect workers' eyes from on-the-job strain or injury. Others may focus on sports vision, head trauma, or ocular disease and special testing. A few optometrists 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 should not be confused with ophthalmologists or dispensing opticians. Ophthalmologists are physicians who perform eye surgery, as well as diagnose and treat eye diseases and injuries. Like optometrists, they also examine eyes and prescribe eyeglasses and contact lenses. Dispensing opticians fit and adjust eyeglasses and, in some States, may fit contact lenses according to prescriptions written by ophthalmologists or optometrists.

EDUCATION REQUIRED

Optometrists need a Doctor of Optometry degree, which requires the completion of a 4-year program at an accredited school of optometry. In 2009, there were 19 colleges of optometry in the U.S. and 1 in Puerto Rico that offered programs accredited by the Accreditation Council on Optometric Education of the American Optometric Association. Requirements for admission to optometry schools include college courses in English, mathematics, physics, chemistry, and biology. Because a strong background in science is important, many applicants to optometry school major in a science, such as biology or chemistry, as undergraduates. Other applicants major in another subject and take many science courses offering laboratory experience.

Admission to optometry school is competitive; about 1 in 3 applicants was accepted in 2007. All applicants must take the Optometry Admissions Test (OAT), a standardized exam which measures academic ability and scientific comprehension. The OAT consists of four tests: survey of the natural sciences, such as biology, general chemistry, and organic chemistry; reading comprehension; physics; and quantitative reasoning. As a result, most applicants take the test after their sophomore or junior year in college, allowing them an opportunity to take the test again and raise their score. A few applicants are accepted to optometry school after 3 years of college and complete their bachelor's degree while attending optometry school. However, most students accepted by a school or college of optometry have completed an undergraduate degree. Each institution has its own undergraduate prerequisites, so applicants should contact the school or college of their choice for specific requirements.

Optometry programs include classroom and laboratory study of health and visual sciences and clinical training in the diagnosis and treatment of eye disorders. Courses in pharmacology, optics, vision science, biochemistry, and systemic diseases are included.

One-year postgraduate clinical residency programs are available for optometrists who wish to obtain advanced clinical competence within a particular area of optometry.

Optometrists - Continued

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OTHER USEFUL SKILLS

Business acumen, self-discipline, and the ability to deal tactfully with patients are important for success. The work of optometrists also requires attention to detail and manual dexterity.

HOW TO ADVANCE

Optometrists who wish to teach or conduct research may study for a master's degree or Ph.D. in visual science, physiological optics, neurophysiology, public health, health administration, health information and communication, or health education.

WORK ENVIRONMENT

Optometrists usually work in their own offices that are clean, well lighted, and comfortable. Although most full-time optometrists work standard business hours, some work weekends and evenings to suit the needs of patients. Emergency calls, once uncommon, have increased with the passage of therapeutic-drug laws expanding optometrists' ability to prescribe medications.

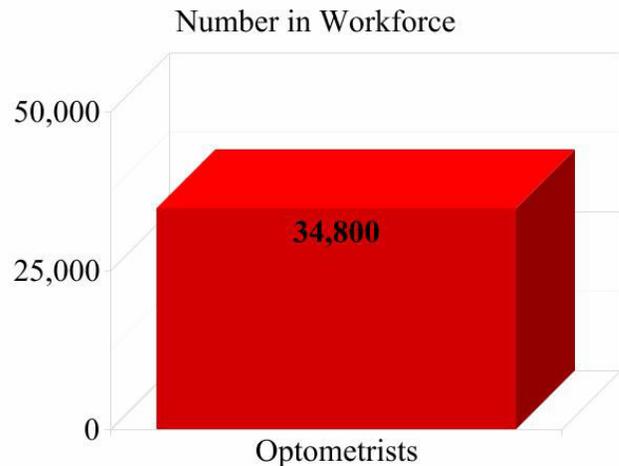
CERTIFICATION REQUIRED

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, regional, or State clinical 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 must be renewed every 1 to 3 years and, in all States, continuing education credits are needed for renewal.

JOB GROWTH

Employment of optometrists is projected to grow 24 percent between 2008 and 2018. A growing population that recognizes the importance of good eye care will increase demand for optometrists. Also, an increasing number of health insurance plans that include vision care should generate more job growth.

As the population ages, there will likely be more visits to optometrists and ophthalmologists because of the onset of vision problems that occur at older ages, such as cataracts, glaucoma, and macular degeneration. In addition, increased incidences of diabetes and hypertension in the general population as well as in the elderly will generate greater demand for optometric services as these diseases often affect eyesight.



Employment of optometrists would grow more rapidly if not for productivity gains expected to allow each optometrist to see more patients. These expected gains stem from greater use of optometric assistants and other support personnel, who can reduce the amount of time optometrists need with each patient.

The increasing popularity of laser surgery to correct some vision problems was previously thought to have an adverse effect on the demand for optometrists as patients often do not require eyeglasses afterward. However, optometrists will still be needed to provide preoperative and postoperative care for laser surgery patients, therefore laser eye surgery will likely have little to no impact on the employment of optometrists.

Excellent job opportunities are expected over the next decade because there are only 19 schools of optometry in the United States, resulting in a limited number of graduates—about 1,200—each year. This number is not expected to keep pace with demand. However, admission to optometry school is competitive.