

R N I B

**How we
can support you**

See differently



**Waiting to see
an eye specialist**



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Introduction

Waiting to see an eye specialist can be a difficult time. You may have questions about what will happen at your appointment or what comes next. Everyone's experience is different, and your journey and needs are unique. We're here to support you at every step.

This guide will help you get ready for your appointments and introduce you to some of the ways RNIB can help while you're waiting and if you are diagnosed with an eye condition.

If you're worried about your sight, RNIB is here for you. We support anyone who is worried about their eyesight, living with sight loss, or supporting someone who is. You can find more information and advice at: [rnib.org.uk/waiting](https://www.rnib.org.uk/waiting)

Your referral to a specialist

If you're worried about your eyesight and haven't already seen an optometrist (often called an optician), it's important that you do. It's the best way to check if your eyes are healthy and detect any problems early on so that you can get the treatment you may need.

Most people should have an eye test at least every two years. You might need to have an examination more often if your age, medical history, or other factors put you at higher risk of developing an eye condition.

Free eye tests and optical vouchers

You may be eligible for a free eye test, depending on where you live in the UK and your personal circumstances. If you're eligible for a free eye test, the NHS covers the cost and you will not need to pay. This doesn't cover the cost of glasses (unless you are receiving benefits).



If you live in England, Wales, or Northern Ireland:

Free eye examinations are available in England, Northern Ireland and Wales for eligible people, including people:

- age 60 or over
- diagnosed with diabetes or glaucoma
- advised by an eye doctor (ophthalmologist) that you're at risk of glaucoma
- claiming benefits such as Universal Credit or claiming tax credits
- on a low income

You may also be entitled to an optical voucher to reduce the cost of glasses or contact lenses. If you receive benefits, or are on a low income, you may be entitled to some support towards the cost of glasses.

You can find out more and check if you're eligible here: [nhs.uk/nhs-services/opticians/free-nhs-eye-tests-and-optical-vouchers/](https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/opticians/free-nhs-eye-tests-and-optical-vouchers/)

If you live in Scotland:

All eye tests in Scotland are free. You can claim a free eye test every two years, although your optician may recommend you get tested more regularly.

More information about free eye tests in Scotland is available here: mygov.scot/free-eye-tests

If your optometrist notices a problem, what next?

If your optometrist thinks there may be a problem with your eyes which needs more investigation or possibly treatment, they'll refer you to either a specialist optometrist or to the hospital eye clinic.

You may be referred to another optometrist if you need more tests to establish if you need to see an ophthalmologist (eye doctor) at the hospital eye clinic. Some minor eye conditions can be monitored or treated by a specialist optometrist, without the need to refer you to hospital. These arrangements normally depend on where you live.

It's important that you attend all your appointments, so that you can get any treatment you may need as soon as possible.



Questions to ask the optometrist

If they are referring you, the optometrist should tell you:

- Where you are being referred
- Who you will see
- Why they are referring you
- How urgently you should be seen

They should also talk to you about your eye health, explain what they're doing and the results of any tests. If you don't understand their advice or recommendations, it's important to ask. Your optometrist will answer your questions or refer you to someone who can.

Helpful questions to ask:

- What are you referring me for?
- How urgent is my appointment with the specialist?
- What other tests might I need to have?

If you have been waiting longer than expected, you should also contact your optometrist or GP so they can help chase up the referral.

You can also request a copy of the referral letter, so you know what your optometrist has said and what their concerns are. It's also helpful to have a copy to give to the specialist when you see them.

What to do if your sight changes suddenly

Any changes you notice in your eyesight should be checked. Many eye conditions can be treated, and the earlier the treatment starts the better.

If your vision changes suddenly while you're waiting, contact your optometrist or GP immediately or **call 111** for advice.

Seek immediate attention if you:

- Notice a sudden change in your vision
- Lose all or part of your vision in one or both eyes
- Have an accident involving your eyes
- Suddenly start seeing flashing lights or floaters in your vision
- Have double vision which starts suddenly and is constant
- Experience pain in your eyes

Depending on your symptoms, you might need to go to the Accident and Emergency department at your local hospital.

Get support while you're waiting

RNIB offer a range of products and services that may help while you wait for your appointment.

There are three key ways we offer help:

1. Over the phone by calling our Helpline on **0303 123 9999**
2. Via email by contacting **helpline@rnib.org.uk**
3. Visit **rnib.org.uk/waiting**



We're here to help

As part of our Helpline, we have a team of advisers who can give you practical and emotional support to help you move forward. It covers a range of topics, including:

- eye conditions
- how to navigate the NHS services
- emotional support
- wellbeing
- employment
- accessing information
- welfare benefits
- your rights

You're not alone – our advice service is here to answer your questions, and help you do the things you want and need to do. Call our Helpline on **0303 123 9999** and choose **option 3** to speak with an adviser.

Preparing for your hospital appointment

Preparing for your appointment can help you get the most out of your time with your eye doctor. We've put together some useful tips to help you get ready for your appointment.

What to take with you:

- Your list of questions and concerns so you don't forget to ask.
- Details of any medications you are taking, even if they're not to do with your eyes.
- The glasses or contact lenses you currently use (check before your appointment if you can wear your contact lenses or not).
- Any letters or records you have about your eyes – even if they're not about the current issue you have.
- A pen and paper so you can write down important information, if you want to. There is a section at the back of this booklet where you can write notes.

Tips to get the most out of your appointment

What to tell the hospital before your appointment:

- How you'd like to receive information about your appointments, for example if you would prefer letters in the post or by email and any other accessibility requirements.
- If you need an interpreter.
- If you need the service to adapt their approach for any specific needs. For example, if you have hearing loss or memory issues.
- If you have reduced mobility and if you need any support getting around the hospital.
- If you wear contact lenses, ask the hospital if you should wear them to your appointment or not.
- It's also worth asking the hospital if you will be allowed to drive home from your appointment. Eye drops are often used at appointments, which can blur your vision and prevent you from driving yourself home.

Things to tell the eye doctor:

- Any eye related symptoms you're experiencing and when they started.
- You and your family's medical history. You should include general health and eye health.
- Anything you're worried about with your eyes.

Questions to ask at your appointment:

- What is the diagnosis and what does it mean?
- Where can I get more information about my condition?
- When is my next appointment?
- Are there any signs or symptoms I should tell the hospital about if they happen before my next appointment?
- If they are recommending treatment, what is the treatment and why is it needed (with clear instructions)?
- Can I drive home?

Bringing someone with you

You may find it helpful to bring someone you trust to your appointment. This is especially useful if you won't be able to drive right after the appointment, as they can drive you to and from the hospital.

They might also remember details and information you don't, and you might find it helpful to have someone with you for support and to pass the time while you wait.

What to do when you arrive

When you arrive, let the receptionist know you're there and they will direct you to the waiting area and remind them of any specific adaptations required (for example if you have hearing loss, dementia, or hidden disabilities).

There may be a long wait period; this is normal and no cause for worry. You might find it helpful to bring something to do while you're waiting, to pass the time and help you relax.

Who you might meet and what they do

Optometrists or ophthalmic opticians

Optometrists or ophthalmic opticians (often called opticians) are qualified to examine your vision, prescribe glasses or contact lenses and detect eye conditions. They can refer you to other healthcare professionals if they notice signs of a problem with your eyes.

You will usually find them in high street practices or shops and hospital eye departments.



Independent prescribers

Independent prescribers are optometrists or ophthalmic opticians who have additional qualifications to manage some minor eye conditions.

Dispensing opticians

Dispensing opticians are qualified to fit and supply glasses. Some have additional qualifications to fit contact lenses and supply low vision aids.

Ophthalmologists

Ophthalmologists are specialist doctors who diagnose, treat and monitor eye conditions with medication and surgery. They normally work in hospital eye departments and clinics.

Orthoptists

Orthoptists are qualified to identify and treat certain eye conditions such as squints or double vision. They usually work in hospital eye departments and do lots of work with children, though they do work with people of all ages.

Ophthalmic nurses

Ophthalmic nurses receive special training in eye conditions and diseases on top of their general training. They may perform some of the tests at the hospital and some ophthalmic nurse specialists may perform treatments for certain eye conditions.

After your appointment

If you're waiting to get your results or have received an eye condition diagnosis, here's what you can do next.

How to find more information

If you've been told you have an eye condition or there's a problem with your eyesight, we can help you get answers. RNIB has easy-to-read information on the most common eye conditions. These guides can help you understand more about your condition and answer questions you might have.

For more information, visit:
[rnib.org.uk/your-eyes/eye-conditions-az/](https://www.rnib.org.uk/your-eyes/eye-conditions-az/)

If you need to talk

You may feel emotional and confused after your appointment. Whatever you're thinking or feeling, we're here to help and support you through your journey.

It's easy to get in touch

- Call our Helpline: **0303 123 9999**
- Email: **helpline@rnib.org.uk**
- Say: **"Alexa, call RNIB Helpline"**

No question is too big or too small.

Useful resources

Here are some other useful resources to help you understand your diagnosis and what help is available in your community.

Sight Advice FAQ

Ask the Sight Advice FAQ website your questions about sight loss and get helpful answers: sightadvicefaq.org.uk.

Sightline Directory

Find services and organisations near you that support people going through changes to their sight: rnib.org.uk/sightline-directory.

Information booklets

We offer a series of resource guides designed to provide you with useful information and to help you face the future with confidence. These cover a range of eye conditions, advice about benefits, emotional support, plus advice and tips on your day-to-day life: rnib.org.uk/resources.

Ask Alexa

We've worked with Amazon to make our information and advice accessible through its digital voice assistant, Alexa. You can also ask Alexa to call our Helpline without needing to touch your phone or pairing it to your device. Just say, "**Alexa, call RNIB Helpline**".

Meet your Eye Care Liaison Officer (ECLO)

If you want to talk to someone about your eye condition or if you have sight loss, your hospital's ECLO is the most important person you can meet. They can talk to you more about what happens next.

Talking to an ECLO at this stage will help you feel more confident about the future, and they can also connect you to practical and emotional support.

ECLOs are an important link between health and social services and are central to the support and wellbeing of people in eye clinics. They're not medically trained, but they can help you make sense of what's happening and planning your next steps.

Check before your appointment to see if your hospital has an ECLO. Visit [rnib.org.uk/sightline-directory](https://www.rnib.org.uk/sightline-directory) and search ECLO and your postcode or call us on **0303 123 9999** and we'll be able to check for you.



Contact us



RNIB Helpline Call: **0303 123 9999**



Email: **helpline@rnib.org.uk**



Sight Advice FAQ: **sightadvicefaq.org.uk**



Or say, **"Alexa, call RNIB Helpline"**
to an Alexa enabled device.

rnib.org.uk

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