
Opticians, Dispensing

(O*NET 29-2081.00)

Significant Points

- Most dispensing opticians receive training on the job or through apprenticeships lasting 2 or more years, but some employers seek graduates of postsecondary training programs in opticianry.
- A license to practice is required by 22 States.
- Employment growth is projected to be average and reflect the steady demand for corrective lenses and fashionable eyeglass frames.

Nature of the Work

Helping people see better and look good at the same time is the job of a dispensing optician. Dispensing opticians help select and then fit eyeglasses and contact lenses for people with eye problems, following prescriptions written by ophthalmologists or optometrists. (The work of optometrists is described elsewhere in the *Handbook*. See the section on physicians and surgeons for information about ophthalmologists.) Dispensing opticians recommend eyeglass frames, lenses, and lens coatings after considering the prescription and the customer's occupation, habits, and facial features. They measure clients' eyes, including the distance between the centers of the pupils and the distance between the ocular surface and the lens. For customers without prescriptions, dispensing opticians may use a focimeter to record eyeglass measurements in order to duplicate their existing eyeglasses. They also may obtain a customer's previous record to re-make eyeglasses or contact lenses, or they may verify a prescription with the examining optometrist or ophthalmologist.

Dispensing opticians prepare work orders that give ophthalmic laboratory technicians the information they need to grind and insert lenses into a frame. (See the section on ophthalmic laboratory technicians elsewhere in the *Handbook*.) The work order includes prescriptions for lenses and information on their size, material, color, and style. Some dispensing opticians grind and insert lenses themselves. They may also apply tint to glasses. After the glasses are made, dispensing opticians verify that the lenses have been ground to specifications. Then they may reshape or bend the frame by hand or using pliers so that the eyeglasses fit the customer properly and comfortably.

Many opticians also spend time fixing, adjusting, and refitting broken frames. They instruct clients about adapting to, wearing, or caring for eyeglasses. Additionally, administrative duties have become a major part of their work, including keeping records on customers' prescriptions, work orders, and payments, and tracking inventory and sales.

Some dispensing opticians, after additional education and training, specialize in fitting contacts, artificial eyes, or cosmetic shells to cover blemished eyes. To fit contact lenses, dispensing opticians measure the shape and size of the eye, select the type of contact lens material, and prepare work orders specifying the prescription and lens size. Fitting contact lenses requires considerable skill, care, and patience. Dispensing



Opticians take measurements to ensure that eyeglasses fit properly.

opticians observe customers' eyes, corneas, lids, and contact lenses with specialized instruments and microscopes. During several follow-up visits, opticians teach proper insertion, removal, and care of contact lenses.

Work environment. Dispensing opticians work indoors mainly in medical offices, optical stores, or in large department or club stores. Opticians spend a fair amount of time on their feet. If they prepare lenses, they need to take precautions against the hazards of glass cutting, chemicals, and machinery. Most dispensing opticians work about 40 hours a week, although a few work longer hours. Those in retail stores may work evenings and weekends. Some work part time.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Most workers entering this occupation receive their training on the job, mainly through apprenticeship programs that may last 2 years or longer. Some employers, though, prefer to hire people who have graduated from an opticianry program.

Education and training. A high school diploma is all that is required to get into this occupation, but most workers have completed at least some college courses or a degree. Classes in physics, basic anatomy, algebra, and trigonometry as well as experience with computers are particularly valuable. These prepare dispensing opticians to learn job skills, including optical mathematics, optical physics, and the use of precision measuring instruments and other machinery and tools.

Most applicants for optician positions do not have any background in the field and learn mainly on the job. Large employers usually offer structured apprenticeship programs; small employers provide more informal, on-the-job training. Apprentices receive technical training and also learn office management and sales. Under the supervision of an experienced optician, optometrist, or ophthalmologist, apprentices work directly with patients, fitting eyeglasses and contact lenses.

Formal training in the field is offered in community colleges and in a few 4-year colleges and universities. As of 2007, the Commission on Opticianry Accreditation accredited 21 associate degree programs. Graduation from an accredited program in opticianry provides a nationally recognized credential. There also are shorter programs of 1 year or less.

Licensure. Twenty-one States require dispensing opticians to be licensed. States may require individuals to pass one or more of the following for licensure: a State practical examination, a State written examination, and certification examinations offered by the American Board of Opticianry (ABO) and

Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment, 2006	Projected employment, 2016	Change, 2006-2016	
				Number	Percent
Opticians, dispensing	29-2081	66,000	72,000	5,700	9

NOTE: Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the *Handbook* introductory chapter on *Occupational Information Included in the Handbook*.

the National Contact Lens Examiners (NCLE). To qualify for the examinations, States often require applicants to complete postsecondary training or work as apprentices for 2 to 4 years.

Some States that license dispensing opticians allow graduates of opticianry programs to take the licensure exam immediately upon graduation; others require a few months to a year of experience. Continuing education is commonly required for licensure renewal. Information about specific licensing requirements is available from the State board of occupational licensing.

Certification and other qualifications. Any optician can apply to the ABO and the NCLE for certification of their skills, whether or not their State requires it. Certification signifies to customers and employers that an optician has a certain level of expertise. All applicants age 18 or older who have a high school diploma or equivalent are eligible for the exam, but some State licensing boards have additional eligibility requirements. Certification must be renewed every 3 years through continuing education. The State of Texas offers voluntary registration for the occupation.

Dispensing opticians deal directly with the public, so they should be tactful, pleasant, and communicate well. Manual dexterity and the ability to do precision work are essential.

Advancement. Many experienced dispensing opticians open their own optical stores. Others become managers of optical stores or sales representatives for wholesalers or manufacturers of eyeglasses or lenses.

Employment

Dispensing opticians held about 66,000 jobs in 2006. About one-third of dispensing opticians worked in offices of optometrists. Nearly one-third worked in health and personal care stores, including optical goods stores. Many of these stores offer one-stop shopping. Customers may have their eyes examined, choose frames, and have glasses made on the spot. Some opticians work in optical departments of department stores or other general merchandise stores, such as warehouse clubs and superstores. Eleven percent worked in offices of physicians, primarily ophthalmologists, who sell glasses directly to patients. Two percent were self-employed and ran their own unincorporated businesses.

Job Outlook

Employment of dispensing opticians is expected to grow about as fast as average for all occupations through 2016, as the population ages and demand for corrective lenses increases. Good job prospects are expected, but the occupation will remain relatively small.

Employment change. Employment in this occupation is expected to rise 9 percent over the 2006-16 decade. Middle age is a time when many individuals use corrective lenses for the first time, and elderly persons generally require more vision care than others. As the share of the population in these older

age groups increases, more opticians will be needed to provide service to them. In addition, awareness is increasing of the importance of regular eye exams across all age groups. A small, but growing number of States require children as young as 5 to get eye exams, which is expected to increase the need for eye care services in those States. Fashion also influences demand. Frames come in a growing variety of styles, colors, and sizes, encouraging people to buy more than one pair.

Moderating the need for optician services is the increasing use of laser surgery to correct vision problems. Although the surgery remains relatively more expensive than eyewear, patients who successfully undergo this surgery may not require glasses or contact lenses for several years. Also, new technology is allowing people with minimal training to make the measurements needed to fit glasses and may allow dispensing opticians to work faster, limiting the need for more workers. There also is proposed legislation that, if passed, may require contact lens manufacturers to make lenses available to nonoptical retail outlets, which may allow them to be sold over the Internet, reducing the need for opticians to provide contact lens services.

Job prospects. Job prospects for entering the profession should be good as there is a regular need to replace those who leave the occupation or retire. Nevertheless, the number of job openings will be limited because the occupation is small. Also, dispensing opticians are vulnerable to changes in the business cycle because eyewear purchases often can be deferred for a time. Job prospects will be best for those who have taken formal opticianry classes and those who master new technology, including new refraction systems, framing materials, and edging techniques.

Earnings

Median annual earnings of dispensing opticians were \$30,300 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$23,560 and \$38,950. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$19,290, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$47,630. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of dispensing opticians in May 2006 were:

Offices of physicians	\$32,770
Health and personal care stores.....	31,850
Offices of health practitioner	29,200
Offices of optometrists.....	29,190

Benefits for opticians are generally determined by the industries in which they are employed. In general, those who work part-time or in small retail shops generally have fewer benefits than those who may work for large optical chains or department stores. Self-employed opticians must provide their own benefits.

Related Occupations

Other workers who deal with customers and perform delicate work include jewelers and precious stone and metal workers, orthotists and prosthetists, and precision instrument and equipment repairers. Ophthalmic laboratory technicians also perform many of the tasks that opticians perform. And because many opticians work in the retail industry, retail salesworkers also perform some of the same duties.

Sources of Additional Information

To learn about voluntary certification for opticians who fit eyeglasses, as well as a list of State licensing boards for opticians, contact:

➤ American Board of Opticianry, 6506 Loisdale Rd., Suite 209, Springfield, VA 22150. Internet: **<http://www.abo.org>**

For information on voluntary certification for dispensing opticians who fit contact lenses, contact:

➤ National Contact Lens Examiners, 6506 Loisdale Rd., Suite 209, Springfield, VA 22150.

Internet: **<http://www.abo-ncle.org>**