

# Opticians, Dispensing

(0\*NET 29-2081.00)

## Significant Points

- Most dispensing opticians receive training on the job or through apprenticeships lasting 2 or more years; twenty-one States require a license.
- Projected employment growth reflects steady demand for corrective lenses and eyeglass frames that are in fashion.
- The number of job openings will be limited because the occupation is small.

## Nature of Work

Dispensing opticians fit eyeglasses and contact lenses, following prescriptions written by ophthalmologists or optometrists. (The work of optometrists is described in a statement elsewhere in the *Handbook*. See the statement on physicians and surgeons for information about ophthalmologists.)

Dispensing opticians examine written prescriptions to determine the specifications of lenses. They recommend eyeglass frames, lenses, and lens coatings after considering the prescription and the customer's occupation, habits, and facial features. Dispensing opticians measure clients' eyes, including the distance between the centers of the pupils and the distance between the surface and the lens. For customers without prescriptions, dispensing opticians may use a lensometer to record eyeglass measurements. They also may obtain a customer's previous record or verify a prescription with the examining optometrist or ophthalmologist.

Dispensing opticians prepare work orders that give ophthalmic laboratory technicians information needed to grind and insert lenses into a frame. The work order includes prescriptions for lenses and information on their size, material, color, and style. Some dispensing opticians grind and insert lenses themselves. 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. Some also fix, adjust, and refit broken frames. They instruct clients about adapting to, wearing, or caring for eyeglasses.

Some dispensing opticians 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 observe customers' eyes, corneas, lids, and contact lenses with special instruments and microscopes. During several visits, opticians show customers how to insert, remove, and care for their contacts. Opticians do all this to ensure that the fit is correct.

Dispensing opticians keep records on customers' prescriptions, work orders, and payments; track inventory and sales; and perform other administrative duties.

## Working Conditions

Dispensing opticians work indoors in attractive, well-lighted, and well-ventilated surroundings. They may work in medical offices or small stores where customers are served one at a time.

Some work in large stores where several dispensing opticians serve a number of customers at once. Opticians spend a lot of time on their feet. If they prepare lenses, they need to take precautions against the hazards associated with glass cutting, chemicals, and machinery.

Most dispensing opticians work a 40-hour week, although some work longer hours. Those in retail stores may work evenings and weekends. Some work part time.

## Employment

Dispensing opticians held about 63,000 jobs in 2002. About 2 out of 5 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. Another 2 out of 5 dispensing opticians worked in offices of physicians or other health practitioners for ophthalmologists or optometrists who sell glasses directly to patients. Some work in optical departments of department stores or other general merchandise stores, such as warehouse clubs and superstores.

## Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Employers usually hire individuals with no background as an optician or those who have worked as ophthalmic laboratory technicians. The employers then provide the required training. (See the statement on ophthalmic laboratory technicians elsewhere in the *Handbook*.) Most dispensing opticians receive training on the job or through apprenticeships lasting 2 or more years. Some employers, however, seek people with postsecondary training in the field.

Knowledge of physics, basic anatomy, algebra, geometry, and mechanical drawing is particularly valuable, because training usually includes instruction in optical mathematics, optical physics, and the use of precision measuring instruments and other machinery and tools. 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.

Large employers usually offer structured apprenticeship programs; small employers provide more informal, on-the-job training. In the 21 States that require dispensing opticians to be



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licensed, individuals without postsecondary training work from 2 to 4 years as apprentices. Apprenticeship or formal training is offered in most States as well.

Apprentices receive technical training and 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. In States requiring licensure, information about apprenticeships and licensing procedures is available from the State board of occupational licensing.

Formal training in the field is offered in community colleges and a few colleges and universities. In 2002, the Commission on Opticianry Accreditation accredited 22 programs that awarded 2-year associate degrees. There also are shorter programs of 1 year or less. Some States that offer a license to dispensing opticians allow graduates to take the licensure exam immediately upon graduation; others require a few months to a year of experience.

Dispensing opticians may apply to the American Board of Opticianry (ABO) and the National Contact Lens Examiners (NCLE) for certification of their skills. Certification must be renewed every 3 years through continuing education. Those licensed in States where licensing renewal requirements include continuing education credits may use proof of their renewed State license to meet the recertification requirements of the ABO. Likewise, the NCLE will accept proof of renewal from any State that has contact lens requirements.

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.

### Job Outlook

Employment of dispensing opticians is expected to increase about as fast as the average for all occupations through 2012 as demand grows for corrective lenses. The number of middle-aged and elderly persons is projected to increase rapidly. 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.

Fashion, too, influences demand. Frames come in a growing variety of styles and colors—encouraging people to buy more than one pair. Demand also is expected to grow in response to the availability of new technologies that improve the quality and look of corrective lenses, such as antireflective coatings and bifocal lenses without the line that is visible in old-style bifocals. Improvements in bifocal, extended-wear, and disposable contact lenses also will spur demand.

The need to replace those who leave the occupation will result in additional job openings. Nevertheless, the number of job openings will be limited because the occupation is small. Dispensing opticians are vulnerable to changes in the business cycle, because eyewear purchases often can be deferred for a time.

### Earnings

Median annual earnings of dispensing opticians were \$25,600 in 2002. The middle 50 percent earned between \$19,960 and \$33,530. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$16,310, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$43,490. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of dispensing opticians in 2002 were as follows:

Offices of physicians .....	\$28,250
Health and personal care stores .....	25,860
Offices of other health practitioners .....	24,900

### Related Occupations

Other workers who deal with customers and perform delicate work include jewelers and precious stone and metal workers, locksmiths and safe repairers, orthotists and prosthetists, and precision instrument and equipment repairers.

### Sources of Additional Information

For general information about opticians and a list of home-study programs, seminars, and review materials, contact:

► National Academy of Opticianry, 8401 Corporate Dr., Suite 605, Landover, MD 20785. Telephone (tollfree): 800-229-4828. Internet: <http://www.nao.org>

For a list of accredited programs in opticianry, contact:

► Commission on Opticianry Accreditation, P.O. Box 3073, Merrifield, VA 22116-3073.

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.org>