



FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION
PROTECTING AMERICA'S CONSUMERS

Buying Prescription Glasses or Contact Lenses: Patient Rights

Taking care of your eye health and monitoring your vision is important. Any time your prescriber measures your prescription for eyeglasses or contact lenses (an exam that is called a refraction), they must give you a copy of your prescription — whether you ask for it or not — at no extra charge. Wherever you choose to buy your glasses or contact lenses, your prescription lets you shop around for the best deal. The FTC enforces the Eyeglass Rule and Contact Lens Rule.

Your Right to Your Prescriptions

You're entitled to get a copy of your glasses and contact lens prescriptions — whether you ask for them or not. It's the law. For glasses, your prescriber must give you a copy immediately after you get an eye exam that includes a refraction (the numbers for your prescription), and before they offer to sell you eyeglasses. For contact lenses, they have to give you a copy after your fitting is complete (which may require a follow-up visit after using trial lenses for a few days).

To get your prescriptions, know that your prescriber

- can't make you pay an extra fee
- can't say you have to buy eyeglasses or contact lenses from them
- can't ask you to sign a waiver or liability release

Here's what to know-

You don't have to buy glasses or contact lenses from the prescriber who performed your refractive examination. You have a right to find the style (for glasses) and price that work for you somewhere else, in person or online. Having a copy of your prescription lets you do that.

Your prescriber may offer a digital copy of your prescriptions as a convenience, but you have a right to a paper copy of each of your prescriptions if you want one.

For digital copies of your prescriptions, your prescriber has to:

- make it available to you immediately after the exam or contact lens fitting and before the prescriber offers to sell you glasses or contact lenses;
- make it available digitally and downloadable for printing — whether by email, text, or a patient portal; and
- ask you to confirm in writing or on a keypad that you agree with the specific way the prescriptions will be made available to you (email, text, or patient portal). You should contact your prescriber’s office if you change your mind.

If you get a paper copy of your prescription, your prescriber may ask you to confirm receipt in writing or by keypad. This documentation provides a way to confirm that prescribers are complying with the law and releasing prescriptions to their patients. You don’t have to confirm that you got your prescription, and prescribers can’t make you return to the office just to do so before releasing your prescription to you.

You have a right to get an additional copy of your contact lens prescription. If you need another copy of your contact lens prescription, or a business has your permission to get a copy, your prescriber has 40 business hours from the time of the request to send it.

Most prescribers charge fees for eye exams. Depending on your eye care needs, eye exams could involve separate fees for an eye health exam, refraction, and contact lens fitting. But the prescriber cannot require you to pay for your exam, contact lens fitting, or evaluation before giving you a copy of your prescription unless they require immediate payment from all eye exam patients.

If you have proof of insurance, it counts as payment for the purpose of determining when a prescription must be given. A prescriber cannot withhold a copy of your prescription for non-payment of the fees that your health insurance should cover. If your health insurance doesn’t cover examination fees, your prescriber may require you to pay those fees before releasing your prescription. Many insurance policies don’t cover contact lens fitting fees and may not cover the refractive exam costs.

Other types of eye examinations evaluate the health of your eyes, but do not determine your refraction (the numbers for your prescription). Prescribers are only required to release prescriptions when they have performed an examination that determines your refraction — no matter the purpose of the exam. When an exam does not include your refraction, the prescriber is not required to give you a copy of your prescription.

In some states, your prescriber can charge you for a pupillary distance measurement — the distance between your pupils. This measurement is needed to fit you for glasses, whether you’re buying in a store or online. A few states require prescribers to include the pupillary distance on the prescription, but most states do not. If a prescriber measures your pupillary distance, but does not give you the measurement, you may be able to get it under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) or state rules covering access to your medical records.

HIPAA doesn’t prevent a prescriber from giving out your prescription. HIPAA protects your medical privacy. But your prescriber can give your prescription to a business that has your permission to get it. In addition, if you ask for your prescription by email, your prescriber cannot use HIPAA as a barrier to sending your prescription electronically.

Buying Contact Lenses

You're entitled to get a copy of your contact lens prescription from your prescriber when they complete your contact lens "fitting." They also may ask you to sign a confirmation that you got a copy of your prescription.

Here's what to know:

Sometimes, a contact lens fitting requires more than one appointment. If you've never worn contact lenses before, or you're trying a new type or brand of lenses, your prescriber may want you to wear the lenses for a few days and return for an in-person follow-up appointment to evaluate how the lenses fit. Sometimes your prescriber will follow up with you by phone or video appointment to ask questions about how your lenses are working for you. In these situations, the fitting would not be complete until the end of the second appointment, whether in-person or by phone or video.

Your prescriber may be able to finalize your prescription at the end of the initial appointment. Often, this happens if there's no change in your contact lens prescription. At that point, the prescriber must give you your prescription automatically.

If the prescriber is willing to sell you lenses, that means the fitting is complete. You'll get your prescription automatically, whether you buy lenses from the prescriber or somewhere else.

You have a right to a paper copy of your contact lens prescription. But if you wish to get an electronic copy of the prescription instead of a paper copy, you have to agree to that in writing or electronically. You also have to agree to the specific way you'll get the prescription (email, portal, or text). If you get your prescription electronically, your prescriber must make it accessible, downloadable, and printable.

The Contact Lens Rule requires contact lens prescriptions to include:

- your name
- the date of your exam
- when your prescription was issued, and when it expires
- the name, mailing address, phone number, and fax number of the prescriber
- the power, material, and/or manufacturer of the prescribed lens
- the base curve or appropriate designation of the lens
- the diameter of the lens, when appropriate
- if you wear private label brand or store brand contacts (often sold by large eye care practices or optical chains), the name of the manufacturer, the brand name, and the name of any identical lens from the same manufacturer, if that applies

Here are some other things for contact lens wearers to know:

Typically, if you want a different brand than the one written on your prescription, you need your prescriber's approval.

You don't need your prescriber's approval to switch brands if a manufacturer offers a brand name and a generic or store brand version of the same lens.

If your prescriber sells contact lenses to the public, they're required to ask you to sign a confirmation that you were given a copy of the prescription.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has advice on healthy contact lens wear and care.

Buying Cosmetic Contact Lenses

You need a prescription for cosmetic contact lenses that only change your appearance.

Here's what else to know:

It is illegal to sell cosmetic lenses without getting or verifying your prescription. Sellers must ask for a copy of your prescription or check your prescription information with your prescriber.

Before you purchase cosmetic contacts, see a prescriber for an eye exam and prescription. Only buy contacts from sellers that require a prescription or will check the prescription information with your prescriber. Your continued good vision depends on it.

Contact lenses, including cat eyes or lenses that change your eye color, can harm your eyes unless they're properly fitted. A prescriber needs to examine your overall eye health and give you a proper contact lens fitting before you wear lenses. Otherwise, you might face serious injuries or complications like

- eye pain or discomfort
- red or swollen eyes
- blurred or decreased vision
- corneal abrasion (cut or scratch on top layer of eye)
- allergic reactions (itchy, watery, or red eyes)
- infection
- blindness

Using Your Prescription

If you want to buy glasses or contacts from someone other than your prescriber, give a copy of the prescription to the seller yourself. This will ensure the seller has accurate information. Most online sellers will have a process for uploading or sending in a copy of your prescription.

If you don't give the seller a copy of the prescription, you can give them information about it and let the seller verify it with your provider. Be sure to include all the information on your prescription: the brand or manufacturer of the recommended contacts, and the power, base curve, or diameter. Give the seller the contact information for your prescriber to verify the contact lens prescription information. It's important to give the seller the correct information. If you don't, and your prescriber doesn't respond to the seller's verification request within eight business hours, the seller can automatically fill your order — even if you gave them incorrect information. This is called “passive verification.” It means you can't count on a prescriber to catch errors in the prescription information you gave to a contact lens seller.

If you're not buying glasses or contacts anytime soon, keep a copy of your prescriptions in a safe place. Or save a picture of your prescription on your phone or computer. It will help if you need to order glasses or contacts quickly.

You cannot use an expired prescription to purchase glasses or contact lenses. State law determines when your prescription for eyeglasses or contact lenses will expire. Eyeglass prescriptions usually are good for a year or two, but state laws vary. The Contact Lens Rule says that contact lens prescriptions must be good for at least a year, unless your prescriber has a medical reason for making it shorter. Don't try to buy glasses or contact lenses with an expired prescription. Your eye health changes over time, so it's important to have regular comprehensive eye health exams.

Report Rule Violations

If you think a prescriber is violating the Eyeglass Rule or the Contact Lens Rule, report it to the FTC at [ReportFraud.ftc.gov](https://www.ftc.gov/ReportFraud).

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