

COVID-19 and Your Eye Care

If you are visiting your ophthalmologist's office for routine eye care or for an urgent need, we understand you may feel nervous about going to your appointment during the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). Rest assured that ophthalmologists, like all medical professionals, follow strict hygiene and disinfection guidelines.

New procedures for routine and urgent eye care

Limiting close physical contact among people is key to helping reduce the spread of the coronavirus. Symptoms of coronavirus—such as fever, cough and shortness of breath—can appear two to 14 days after a person is exposed. People with severe infections can develop pneumonia and die from this lung illness.

As eye care clinics gradually begin scheduling in-person appointments, some may continue to offer "virtual" telemedicine visits over the phone or through video chat on a computer or smartphone.

For in-person appointments, here are ways your ophthalmologist will protect patient health in the office or clinic setting during COVID-19.

Expect changes to eye exams and procedures:

- You should wear a mask to your appointment. If you do not have a mask, the eye clinic may provide one for you.

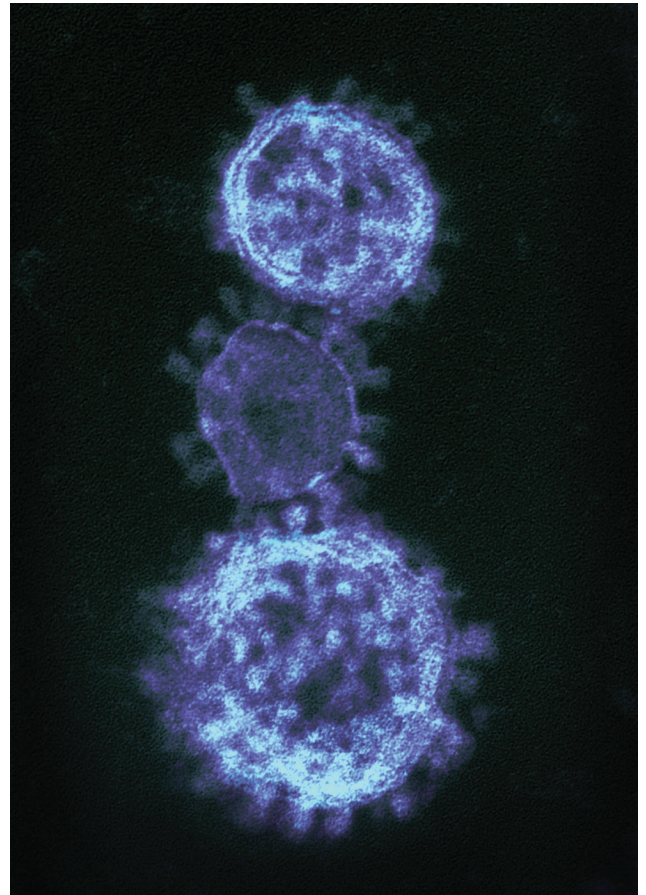


Photo credit: National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID).

- The clinic may ask you to wait outside, or in your car, instead of in the normal waiting room. This is to protect you, the other patients, and the office staff from possible virus exposure in crowded waiting areas.

- The clinic is likely restricting the number of people that enter. If you do not need someone there with you, please do not bring your driver or companion inside the office to your appointment.
- Staff may check your temperature to make sure you do not have a fever.
- Your eye doctor may use a special plastic breath shield on the slit-lamp machine they use to look into your eyes. They will wear a mask, and may wear gloves and goggles or a plastic shield over their eyes.
- Your doctor may ask you to wait to speak until after your eye exam is complete. Then they can talk with you and answer questions when they can be a safe distance from you.

You will be asked to follow special guidelines for safety.

- If you have a cough or a fever, or have been in close contact with someone who has these symptoms, you must call your doctor's office ahead of time and let them know. If your visit is not an emergency, you may need to stay home.
- If you arrive sick, your doctor may ask you to go home. If you have an eye problem that must be seen right away, you will be asked to wait in a special room away from other patients. The clinic staff and your ophthalmologist may wear more protective equipment, such as a gown and gloves.

- If you need to cough or sneeze during your exam, move back from the slit-lamp microscope machine. Bury your face in the crook of your arm or cover your face with a tissue. Wash your hands with soap and water right away.

Ophthalmologists are always available for eye emergencies.

Remember that ophthalmologists are always available to treat urgent/emergency eye issues, deliver eye injections and provide critical care.

Call your ophthalmologist or other medical doctor as soon as possible in the following situations:

- You have macular degeneration or diabetic retinopathy and get regular eye injections
- You notice changes in your vision (like blurry, wavy or blank spots in your field of vision)
- You have an eye injury, even if it seems minor
- You notice new floaters or flashes in your vision
- You suddenly lose some vision
- You have a red eye or eye pain, especially if it is along with headache, nausea or vomiting

How can coronavirus affect your eyes?

Coronavirus can spread through the eyes—just as it does through the mouth or nose. When someone who has coronavirus coughs, sneezes, or talks, virus particles can spray from their mouth or nose onto your face. You are likely to breathe these tiny droplets in through your mouth or nose. But the droplets can also enter your body through your eyes. You can also become infected by touching your eyes after touching something that has the virus on it.

It might be possible for coronavirus to cause a pink eye infection (conjunctivitis), but this is rare. If you have pink eye, don't panic. Simply call your ophthalmologist to let them know and follow their instructions for care. Keep in mind that whether pink eye is caused by a virus or bacteria, it can spread if someone touches that sticky or runny discharge from the eyes, or touches objects contaminated by the discharge. Wash your hands and use hand sanitizer often. Do not share towels, cups or utensils with others.

Protecting your eyes and health

Guarding your eyes — as well as your hands, nose, and mouth — can slow the spread of coronavirus. Here are some ways to you can keep your eyes safe and healthy during this coronavirus outbreak.

If you wear contact lenses, try switching to glasses for a while.

Contact lens wearers touch their eyes more than the average person. Consider wearing glasses more often, especially if you tend to touch your eyes a lot when your contacts are in. Substituting glasses for lenses can reduce eye irritation, and they may be a barrier that reminds you not to touch your eye. If you must wear contacts, be sure to clean and disinfect them exactly as your eye doctor recommends.

Wearing glasses may add a layer of protection.

Corrective lenses or sunglasses can shield your eyes from infected respiratory droplets. But keep in mind that they don't provide 100% security. The virus can still reach your eyes from the open sides, tops and bottoms of your glasses. For better protection, you must use safety goggles if you're caring for a sick patient or potentially exposed person.

Stock up on eye medicine prescriptions if you can.

If your insurance allows you to get more than one month of necessary eye medicine (like glaucoma drops), you should. Some insurers will approve a 3-month supply of medication in times of natural disaster. Ask your pharmacist or ophthalmologist for help if you have trouble getting approval from your insurance company. As always, request a refill as soon as you are due. Don't wait until the last minute to contact your pharmacy

Avoid rubbing your eyes.

It can be hard to break this natural habit, but doing so will lower your risk of infection. If you feel an urge to itch or rub your eye or even to adjust your glasses, use a tissue instead of your fingers. Dry eyes can lead to more rubbing, so consider adding moisturizing drops to your eye routine. If you must touch your eyes for any reason — even to administer eye medicine — wash your hands first with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Then wash them again after touching your eyes.

Use common sense to stay healthy.

Wash your hands a lot. Follow good contact lens hygiene. And avoid touching or rubbing your nose, mouth and eyes.

If you have any questions about your eyes or your vision, be sure to ask your ophthalmologist.

Get more information about eye health from EyeSmart—provided by the American Academy of Ophthalmology—at aao.org/eyesmart.

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