



Reading glasses: prescription or over-the-counter?

It comes with no warning like many other uninvited signs of aging. One morning you wake up and there's a new wrinkle or grey hair, or you find yourself holding the menu at arm's length to read it. It's called presbyopia and it is the farsightedness caused by ageing. In fact, the term "presbyopia" comes from a Greek word which means "old eye."

Presby-what?

As we age, the crystalline lens in the eye loses elasticity. When this occurs, it prevents your eyes from focusing as well as they used to. Most people start to notice changes to their close vision from around the age of 40 and symptoms, which develop gradually, include:

- Having difficulty reading small print
- Needing to hold reading material at arm's length to focus on it
- Blurred vision at normal reading distance (about 35cm)
- Having difficulty reading small print
- Eye fatigue and headaches when doing close work

Help! My arms aren't long enough!

When we start to experience these symptoms, most people head off to the pharmacy to buy over-the-counter readers, which basically magnify whatever you're trying to read and make it easier to view. Wesley Language, head of optometry at Spec-Savers, says these are fine as a back-up but should not be used all the time. 'I liken it to running shoes: if you're an occasional jogger, basic inexpensive running shoes will work for your needs. But if you're a regular runner, you'll need to invest in specialised running shoes that will provide the support your feet and gait need.'

Likewise, if your job requires long hours of reading or computer work, readers won't fit the bill. You need spectacles or contact lenses that have been specifically prescribed for your unique eyesight to avoid eye strain and headaches,' he says.

Even though over-the-counter readers are inexpensive and convenient, there are a few specific reasons to opt for prescription reading glasses:

- In over-the-counter readers, the lens 'power' is the same for each eye, whereas for the majority of the population their eyes are not uniformly strong or weak. It can cause eye strain if you read through lenses of the wrong prescription for an extended period.
- Over-the-counter readers are 'one size fits all' in that they are made to a standard pupillary distance, which is the distance between the centres of the pupils of the eyes and the lenses. If the lens centre is not in line with your pupil centre, you might not be able to see clearly or may end up with eye strain – as if you were wearing someone else's glasses.
- Over-the-counter readers do not correct astigmatism, which affects eight out of nine people to some degree. Astigmatism can cause headaches, tired eyes, and blurry vision and require professional intervention to correct.
- Over-the-counter readers cannot correct distance vision, so if you also need glasses for distance vision, you should consider bifocals or multifocals/progressive lenses. Bifocals help you see both close-up and far away, while multifocals/progressive lenses adjust for close, intermediate and distance viewing. Progressive lenses are beneficial for people with presbyopia because they provide clear distance and near vision, as well as clear intermediate (computer) vision.

What else do I need to know?

Some people believe that wearing reading glasses worsens their near vision, but this is a myth. The decline in vision is due to presbyopia, which progresses naturally regardless of whether you wear glasses or not. You also become accustomed to clear vision when wearing reading glasses, so when you take them off, your vision seems to have worsened, when you are simply experiencing the contrast between corrected and uncorrected vision.

If your eyes and career choice mean that over-the-counter readers are adequate for your needs, it's still worth having an eye test so your optometrist can recommend the right lens power for your eyes. Make sure to discuss your occupation and the types of hobbies you enjoy, as the power may depend on your daily activities. For example, the power prescribed for spending eight hours a day on the computer will likely be different than one prescribed if you spend a lot of time reading or working with fine detail.

'We also recommend an eye examination at least every 24 months so we can check for problems like glaucoma, cataracts and macular degeneration, the risk of which increase with age,' says Language.

It may seem like a big step to accept that your eyes aren't quite what they used to be, but correcting your vision is easier than you think. Simply book [online](#) at any of Spec-Savers' [330 stores](#) around the country to find your nearest specialist store and give those ageing eyes the help they need!

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Notes to Editors

Spec-Savers is the leading optometry group in South Africa with 330 stores nationwide. Established in 1993, the brand is dedicated to delivering affordable eye care to the Southern African public, without compromising either quality or professional standards. Since 2008, Spec-Savers has helped over 320 000 children through its *Kids Right to Good Sight* initiative, which offers a free eye examination, pair of frames and clear lenses for children aged 6 to 12 years to dramatically improve their lives.

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