



Issued: 23 March 2020

Recommendation to only offer 'essential' eye care

We have listened to our members' concerns, and the public health advice coming from the UK's governments to avoid social contact where possible. As a result The College recommends that every optometrist and practice owner stops providing routine sight tests and routine eye examinations, and offers only essential services. Essential services would include sight tests based on a clinical need, and urgent eye care pathways. We note that some practices are doing this on a voluntary basis already.

There are several reasons for this:

1. Practices now need to contribute to the public health endeavour of ensuring that people only go out when necessary. Routine sight tests can be safely delayed.
2. It is essential we help to keep the nation's sight healthy - from NHS frontline staff to those in self-isolation. Our communities still need essential eye care, and secondary care may need our support to see urgent cases. We therefore need to ensure our members and all optical staff are able to protect themselves and maintain the safety of their communities.
3. We understand the growing concern about the potential for tears to lead to COVID-19 infection and are waiting for more certain evidence on this. In the meantime optometrists should not put themselves at unnecessary risk, and we are asking UK governments to provide appropriate PPE for optometrists who are providing essential services.

We note that the Welsh and Scottish governments have already issued advice on essential primary eye services and stopping routine sight tests. We are pressing NHS England and the HSCNI to do the same, and to provide financial support to enable practices to continue to be viable eye care centres.

I feel unsafe seeing patients without appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE)

We are calling on UK governments to provide access to PPE and training on how to use it for optometrists wishing to provide essential eye care.

I am a pre-reg trainee – how will this affect me?

Although assessments have stopped, we know that we have previously advised that trainees can continue to see patients. With only essential services being provided, trainees can help with telephone triage to decide whether a patient should be seen. We are currently liaising with the GOC on changes that we can make to the Scheme for Registration requirements so that trainees are not unfairly held back in their progress.

What is essential?

Examples of essential optometric practice would include providing replacement spectacles for a key worker who has broken theirs, or seeing patients with acute eye- or sight-related symptoms. It would not include seeing patients who are attending practice for their routine sight test without eye- or sight-related symptoms.

We recommend that – before making any appointment – you operate a telephone triage service to determine whether or not a patient falls into the 'essential' category, and explain to other patients why you are postponing their appointment.

This will affect my business – how will I cope?

We understand that this is a difficult decision for practice owners to make, but we feel this is the right decision for optometrists, their staff and the wider public in helping slow the spread of the pandemic and ensuring that we are able to help with the backlog of patients that will ensue as a result. We are pressing NHS England and NHSCI to provide financial support to enable practices to continue to be viable eye care centres.