

Save big on eyewear

You can find deep discounts if you know how to shop

I F YOU'RE LIKE many of our readers, you're buying prescription glasses from your eye doctor's office or an independent shop, and you're happy with the results.

But you're probably paying much more than you would if you comparison shopped at different types of eyewear stores, including discounters such as Costco and online retailers. Doing just that, we were able to shave more than 40 percent off the prices of frames and lenses. And that's good news considering that a pair of eyeglasses with just basic prescription lenses can cost you hundreds.

The almost 19,500 readers who responded to a recent CONSUMER REPORTS survey spent a median of \$244 out-of-pocket on their last pair of prescription specs. Perhaps not surprisingly, they gave one of the least expensive retailers, Costco, the highest overall satisfaction score among chains and other discounters, including BJ's Optical, LensCrafters, and Pearle Vision. Costco's score was on a par with independent shops and doctors' offices.

One reason glasses cost a lot is they are part fashion accessory. You may even

think paying more will improve not just the view you'll see but the image you'll project. And there are so many choices for lenses and coatings, it's easy to be confused about what's worth buying.

It doesn't help that the industry is dominated by just a couple of players, including Italy-based Luxottica, which owns LensCrafters and Pearl Vision, the vision centers at Sears and Target, and vision insurance provider EyeMed. It also licenses many popular eyewear brands and owns

Ray-Ban, Oakley, and others.

Another is California-based VSP Global, which owns, among other eyewear-related enterprises, VSP Vision Care, the nation's largest vision insurance plan; and Marchon Eyewear, producer of eyewear labels such as Calvin Klein, Fendi, and Flexon.

Where to shop

The best place to shop depends on your needs and preferences. Your options include:

Eye doctors and independent shops. If

Same frames, different prices

We comparison shopped for this Polo men's frame online and at a walk-in retailer. After adding polycarbonate lenses and antireflective coating, we saved 43 percent online, despite LensCrafter's 30 percent discount at the time. Online orders qualify for free shipping.

Store	Frame	Lenses	Antireflective coating	Total ⁽¹⁾
LensCrafters	\$207	\$195	\$85	\$341 ⁽²⁾
FramesDirect.com	155	89	45	259 ⁽³⁾
SimplyEyeglasses.com	121	59	39	219
Eyeglasses.com	138	59	20	217
LensesRx.com	120	40	35	195

MAXIMUM SAVINGS \$146

⁽¹⁾ Some prices are promotional. ⁽²⁾ Total after 30 percent discount. ⁽³⁾ Total after \$30 discount.



Polo PH2015 men's frame

money's no object or you have a generous vision plan, you might consider buying from either of those sellers, both of which received top marks from readers for merchandise quality and customer service.

Chain retailers. Readers were essentially pleased with their purchase experience at retailers like Eye Masters, Pearle Vision, and Sears Optical, but results were mixed. LensCrafters was singled out as the place to get eyewear fastest—almost half of readers who shopped there had their glasses the same or next day.

Discount stores. When it came to cost and just about everything else, readers gave Costco high marks, with BJ's Optical, Sam's Club, and Walmart close behind.

During a recent trip to Costco, we found a Fendi women's frame for \$110—\$120 to \$250 less than at other retailers. Add lenses at Costco's rock-bottom prices and you'd be all set. But readers weren't that impressed by Costco's selection of frames.

And you may have to wait a week or more for your glasses. Some discounters accept few, if any, insurance plans, so you might have to pay up front and seek reimbursement if your plan allows it.

Online shops. If you can't find a suitable frame at a discounter, try online shops, where the selection often is huge and the prices low. Many eyeglass sites have lots of general information about selecting the right frames, lenses, and coatings. You might even be able to upload your photo and try on frames virtually.

A new segment of online shop, including Zenni Optical (zennioptical.com), Warby Parker (warbyparker.com), and Classic Specs (classicspecs.com), offers a complete single-vision pair of glasses for less than \$100. Depending on the site, frames can be mailed to you to try on at no charge. But most of those sites sell only their own brands, so you're unlikely to find that designer frame you fell for elsewhere.

That's not the case at most online shops, where we had success finding the same frames we saw in walk-in stores, and at cut-rate prices. For example, a men's Polo frame priced at \$207 at LensCrafters was available at LensesRx Online Optical (lensesrx.com) for \$120. When we added single-vision polycarbonate lenses and a basic antireflective coating, the online total came to \$195, almost \$300 off LensCrafter's price. After taking into account a 30 percent-off special LensCrafters had at the time, we still were ahead by \$146.

But there are things to consider when using eyeglass websites. And because only 2 percent of our survey respondents have shopped online, we don't have a lot of data on customer satisfaction—although eight of 10 readers who shopped for glasses on the Web said they would do so again.

Another concern is that buying online means having to wait for your glasses to arrive in the mail and shipping them back if there's a problem. And online retailers can't give you the in-person service you'd get at a walk-in store, a problem if your frames need adjusting, for example.

Many online eyeglass stores offer prescription lenses; you simply enter the measurements on your prescription into an online form. But if you have a complex prescription requiring additional measurements, ordering online isn't the best choice, says Jeffrey Rohlf, instructing optician at the Ohio State University College of Optometry and president of the state board that licenses opticians in Ohio.

One option is to buy only the frames online and order the lenses locally. Walmart charges \$10 to add lenses to frames you bring in; Costco's fee is \$18. (Of course, you'll also pay for the cost of the lenses.) But don't expect an online shop to take your vision insurance, though you may be able to obtain reimbursement from your provider.

How to choose

Research online. Even if you plan to buy locally, consider reading the how-to information on such websites as Eyeglasses.com and LensesRx Online Optical. Knowing something about the types of frames, lenses, and coatings can help you understand your options and sense whether a store or website is trying to sell you more than you need. When we ordered glasses with a simple, single-vision prescription, one online shop automatically checked the box for \$40 polycarbonate lenses,

Lenses and coatings: The lingo

CR-39. Inexpensive plastic lenses with good optics, and easy to tint. Less impact-resistant than some others. Can look thick with stronger prescriptions.

Polycarbonate. Highly shatter-resistant plastic lenses that are thinner and lighter but usually more expensive than CR-39. Recommended for children and athletes. Not as good optically as others, especially in strong prescriptions. Easily scratched, even with scratch-resistant coatings.

High-index. Lenses of a lightweight material that refracts light more, allowing them to be thinner. Enables people with strong prescriptions to have more comfortable glasses and a greater choice of frames. Not as impact-resistant as polycarbonate but better optically. More expensive than other options.

Progressive. Provides a gradual change in power for different viewing distances without a visible border separating them. Usually more expensive than standard bifocals and trifocals. Can take days to weeks to get accustomed to using.

Photochromic. Lenses that are almost clear indoors but darken automatically in sunlight. The best-known brand is Transitions. Many photochromic lenses don't darken as well as dark sunglasses.

Trivex. Lightweight, impact-resistant lenses that are optically superior to



polycarbonate though generally pricier. The best choice for people with rimless or semi-rimless frames.

HD (digital) lenses. Precision, diamond-cut lenses with improved optics. Most beneficial for progressive lenses. Adds 30 percent or more to the lens cost.

Antireflective. Improves clarity and reduces reflections, improving vision under strong light and at night and making eyes more attractive to others. Especially useful or included automatically on high-index lenses. Smudges can be more noticeable.

Scratch resistance. Protects lenses. Standard on all lenses but some CR-39.

Ultraviolet protection. Blocks ultraviolet light. Consider only for some lower-cost CR-39 lenses, which, even without the coating, block far more UV light than wearing no glasses at all.

when \$10 CR-39 lenses were just fine. And the site auto-selected a \$19 extended warranty, which we don't recommend. Also, check whether the Better Business Bureau (*bbb.org*) has a report on the store or website where you plan to make your purchase. Some of the lowest-priced retailers we found also had F ratings at the BBB, including the online shops Go-Optic and EZContacts.

Get your doctor's recommendation. If your current prescription is more than a year old, have an optometrist or ophthalmologist check your eyes before you order new glasses. Ask your eye doctor for advice on the types of lenses you should choose. Also request that the doctor measure and record your pupillary distance, which you'll need if you order lenses online.

Try frames on in person. Nothing beats seeing and feeling the frames on your face. Keep in mind that the strength of your prescription can affect which frame and lenses you should select, something a professional can help you with. If you plan to comparison shop, record the frame brand, model, and size, marked on the frame's temples.

Ask about your benefits. Find out whether the retailer accepts your vision insurance. If not, ask your plan administrator whether you can use an out-of-network provider and, if so, how that affects your coverage. Ask what proof of purchase you'll need to be reimbursed, and verify

that the retailer can provide it.

Look for promotions. Walk-in stores and websites often have special deals, but check the fine print. You may not be eligible if you're using insurance or not buying both frames and lenses.

Negotiate. Don't hesitate to try dicker-ing on price, especially if you're not using insurance. If you tried on frames locally and found them online for less, it's only fair to give the walk-in store a chance to

Costco gets high marks for price and just about everything else.

match or at least come close to your best online price. Remember that a walk-in shop can provide frame adjustments and other post-purchase service that can be difficult or impossible to get online, so it may be worth paying extra.

Check warranties and return policies. A good retailer should have at least a one-year warranty against defects in frames. For instance, Eyeglasses.com says most of its frames are covered by the manufacturer for one or two years and that it will process claims on the customer's behalf. We found some walk-in stores and web-

sites with much shorter time limits.

Even if your glasses aren't defective, you may decide you don't like them. Many retailers have a certain return period, even if you ordered lenses. LensCrafters will replace frames and lenses or provide a refund within 90 days. SimplyEyeglasses.com will let you choose a new pair once within seven days. Eyeglasses.com and FramesDirect.com give you 30 days to return frames. If you also ordered lenses, you'll get a credit of 50 percent of the cost.

Check out your new specs. Report any problem with your glasses to the retailer immediately. If you bought them online and have a problem with the lenses, have your eye doctor verify that they match your prescription. If they don't, the retailer should remake the lenses at no cost.

If the frames need adjusting, as they did for 17 percent of our survey respondents, your local eyeglass shop may be willing to do it for you, especially if you bought your lenses there. But there could be a charge. Eyeglasses.com has instructions for adjusting fit yourself, though that could be risky. Classic Specs offers to reimburse you for whatever an optical shop charges to perform a post-purchase adjustment.

Buy another pair. If you found a good deal, consider getting an extra pair in case your primary glasses get lost or damaged. Then you won't have to pay a premium for a rush job at a retailer.

Ratings Eyeglass stores

In order of reader score.

Retailer	Price	Reader score	Survey results							
			Quality of frames and lenses	Employees' knowledge	Cost	Time to make glasses	Care taken to fit frames and lenses correctly	Frame selection	Follow-up service	
		0								
		100								
Costco Optical	\$186	87	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	●
Private doctor's office	300	85	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	●
Independent eyeglass shop	295	84	●	●	○	●	●	●	○	●
Kaiser Permanente	266	83	●	●	○	●	●	●	○	●
For Eyes Optical	181	82	●	●	○	●	●	●	○	●
BJ's Optical	176	80	●	●	○	●	●	○	○	●
Sam's Club Optical	225	80	●	●	○	●	●	○	○	●
Shopko Eyecare Center	223	80	●	●	○	●	●	○	○	●
Walmart Vision Center	204	78	●	●	○	●	●	○	○	●
LensCrafters	298	77	●	●	●	●	●	○	○	●
Sears Optical	220	77	●	●	○	○	●	○	○	●
Pearle Vision	305	75	●	●	●	○	●	○	○	●
EyeMasters	219	74	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	●
JCPenney Optical	213	72	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Visionworks	200	72	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
America's Best Contacts & Eyeglasses	210	71	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Better ← → Worse
 ● ● ○ ● ●



Guide to the Ratings

Ratings are based on 19,489 reader responses to the 2012 Consumer Reports National Research Center Annual Questionnaire regarding eyeglass purchase experiences from January 2010 through June 2012. **Price** reflects the median out-of-pocket cost paid for a pair of eyeglass frames and lenses with little or no insurance coverage. It includes both regular and progressive lenses. **Reader score** reflects overall satisfaction with the retail experience and is not limited to the factors listed under survey results. A score of 100 would mean all respondents were completely satisfied; 80, that respondents were very satisfied, on average; 60, fairly well satisfied. Differences of fewer than 6 points are not meaningful. The Ratings under **survey results** represent respondent satisfaction with the retailers on each factor. Ratings are based on the experiences of CONSUMER REPORTS subscribers, who may not be representative of the general U.S. population.

Canada Extra

Information from CONSUMER REPORTS® for Canadian readers

In this special section

Washers	32A
Dryers	32B
Tablets	32B
Basic cameras	32C
Advanced cameras	32C
Autos	32D
Contact info	32D

How to use the Canada Extra section

Every month, Canada Extra provides Canadian pricing and availability information about products tested for that issue. The Ratings in this section are based on this month's reports, but they narrow your choices to the products that are sold in Canada.

You can use this section in either of two ways: Start with the main report, read about the products that interest you, and turn to this section to find whether they're sold—and for what price—in Canada. Or start here, find products sold in Canada whose price and overall score appear promising, and read more about them in the main report and full Ratings chart; page numbers appear with each Canadian report. (For some products, the Canadian model designation differs slightly from the one used in the U.S.)

In most cases, the prices we list here

are the approximate retail in Canadian dollars; manufacturers' list prices are indicated by an asterisk (*). Check marks identify CR Best Buys or recommended products in the U.S. Ratings. "NA" in a chart means that information wasn't available from the manufacturer. We include, in the Contact Info list on page 32D, the manufacturer's phone number and Web address in Canada, so that you can call or go online to get information on a model you can't find in the stores. (Many products that aren't available in Canadian stores can be bought online.)

We appreciate your support, but we don't take it for granted. Please write to CanadaExtra@cu.consumer.org and tell us what you think. We can't reply to every e-mail message or implement every suggestion, but with your help we'll try to keep growing to serve your needs.

- CR Best Buy** Products with this icon offer the best combination of performance and price. All are recommended.
- Recommended** Models with this designation perform well and stand out for reasons we note.

Washers Report and Ratings, pages 42-45

Recommended models only, from 131 tested.

Rec.	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score
				0 100
				P F G VG E

A FRONT-LOADERS All have large capacities. As a category, front-loaders are energy-efficient.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	Maytag Maxima XL YMHW6000AW	NA	90
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	Whirlpool Duet WFW88HEAW ¹	\$1,200	90
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3	Samsung WF457ARG5[GR]	1,800	89
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	4	LG WM8000H[V]A ²	1,700	89
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	5	LG WM3470H[W]A	1,300	88
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	6	Whirlpool Duet WFW96HEA[W] ¹	1,500	87
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	7	Samsung WF435ATGJ[WR]	1,600	87
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	8	Whirlpool Duet WFW94HEX[W]	1,200	87
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	11	LG WM3070H[W]A	1,200	87
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	12	Samsung WF511AB[W]	1,300	86
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	14	Samsung WF405ATPA[WR]	1,400	86

Rec.	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score
				0 100
				P F G VG E

B TOP-LOADERS All are high-efficiency and have large capacities.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	LG WT1101CW	\$ 850	82
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	Samsung WA422PRHD[WR]	900	82
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3	LG WT5070C[W]	1,100	81
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	4	Samsung WA484DSHA[WR]	1,200	81
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	6	Maytag Bravos XL MVWB750Y[W] ¹	1,000	79
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	8	LG WT5170H[W]	1,200	78
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	9	Samsung WA456DRHD[WR]	1,000	78
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	10	GE GTAN8250DWS ¹	NA	77
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	12	Maytag Bravos XL MVWB950Y[W] ¹	1,200	76

¹ Made in the U.S. ² Wider than most machines.