



Internet Dispensing

Background

Revised August 2025

The landscape of e-commerce is evolving rapidly, with digital platforms increasingly offering services that were once exclusively provided in person. Among these services is the online dispensing of eyewear. The growing popularity of purchasing prescription eyeglasses and contact lenses online reflects consumer demand for convenience and affordability, with rapid growth in sales of contact lenses in particular.¹ Health Canada has classified and regulated prescription eyeglasses and contact lenses as medical devices. However, regulations surrounding dispensing differ between provinces. In most provinces, patients can purchase eyeglasses and contact lenses from a regulated dispensing professional—ophthalmologists, physicians, optometrists, and opticians. The province of British Columbia changed its regulations in 2010, deregulating the dispensing of eyeglasses and allowing replacement contact lenses to be dispensed indefinitely by anyone. These regulation changes raise concerns about the safety and efficacy of eyewear dispensed online, which can have a significant impact on patient care.

Policy Issue

The rise of internet dispensing of eyeglasses has introduced significant concerns regarding the accuracy and safety of prescription eyewear. Traditional in-person dispensing or online dispensing by a regulated professional allows licensed eye care professionals to verify prescriptions and ensure correct fit of eyeglasses and contact lenses. However, internet dispensing by unregulated professionals often lacks stringent verification and fitting processes. This absence of regulation and oversight can lead to various risks for consumers.

One of the primary concerns with unregulated internet dispensing is the lack of a prescription verification process among many online vendors. Prescription verification ensures that patients purchase eyewear with an up-to-date and accurate prescription for their vision needs, which is essential for effective vision correction and overall eye health. Without prescription verification, there is risk of patients receiving incorrect or outdated prescriptions.

Additionally, eyecare products like contact lenses and glasses are highly customized, as people have different facial structures, pupillary distances (PDs), corneal curvatures, and other unique measurements. Eyewear that is not properly manufactured or fitted could lead to eyestrain, headaches, and overall discomfort.

Concerns persist regarding the quality of eyeglasses purchased online. An earlier study conducted by the American Optometric Association, which evaluated the safety and compliance of eyeglasses purchased online, found that nearly half (44.8%) of the eyeglasses failed at least 1 parameter of optical or impact testing.² These findings remain pertinent, as a more recent American study indicated that nearly 1 in 10 eyeglasses ordered online failed to meet national standards for optical quality.³ Similar trends have been observed in Europe as well; a UK study comparing eyeglasses purchased online with those purchased from an optometry practice found that a significantly greater number of online eyeglasses were deemed unsafe or unacceptable due to either poor spectacle frame fit, poor cosmetic appearance, or inaccurate optical centration.⁴

In addition to the concerns about the quality of eyeglasses obtained online, there are also concerns that unregulated internet dispensing may encourage members of the public to bypass comprehensive eye exams and regular eye care. Many mistakenly believe that eye examinations serve the purpose of obtaining a prescription.⁵ Deregulation allows consumers to purchase eyewear online without the verification of a valid prescription, raising concerns about the reliance on symptoms as a common motivator for seeking eye care. This situation creates the potential for Canadians to bypass eye examinations where asymptomatic eye diseases could be detected and optical prescriptions refined. This could lead to missed opportunities for early diagnosis and treatment, ultimately impacting overall eye health.

Unregulated internet eye wear suppliers continue to entice consumers in Canada to purchase eyeglasses and contact lenses online without the benefit of quality assurance and accountability. The public is generally unaware that these providers are unregulated. Not only does unregulated internet dispensing expose the public to the risk of substandard care, but it also presents a verification challenge for third party payers.

Policy Position

The CAO recognizes and supports consumer choice in eyewear dispensing, however, maintains that dispensing should be a regulated practice with safeguards in place to ensure the safety and accuracy of eyeglasses and contact lenses.

The public interest is best served and protected through a controlled environment for the purchase of online prescription eyewear. The CAO proposes that internet eyewear dispensing must comply with the following principles of optometric dispensing:

- Patient safety
- Professional accountability and discretion
- Assurance of optimal appliance efficacy
- Availability of continuing care

Further, the following requirements of dispensing are essential to ensure that eyeglasses and contact lenses are provided as prescribed and achieve optimal performance:

- **Verification of a current and valid eyeglasses prescription** secured from a regulated eye care professional
- **Accurate and appropriate frame and/or lens measurements** assured by a regulated eye care professional
- **Personalized verification, fitting, and adjustment** of eyeglasses and contact lenses by a regulated eye care professional
- **Verification of a current and valid eyeglasses or contact lens prescription** prepared by an authorized, regulated eye care professional

References

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