BACKGROUND: The patient responsibility concept is based on better informed patients who can shoulder the responsibility for their own health and who can discuss matters competently with their health care provider, becoming partners of their doctors in enabling them to make informed decisions about their medical care. Better patient information and more active participation is also often associated with greater patient satisfaction, improved compliance with treatment and therefore better quality as well as reduced cost health care. The aim of this study was to evaluate how well informed the ophthalmic patient is before visiting the ophthalmologist and what are his needs for additional information. MATERIALS AND METHODS: 106 patients seen in four ophthalmic practices in Switzerland completed a specifically developed and validated questionnaire. We recorded demographic and eye disease information, the time spent to get the information, the sources used, the degree of satisfaction achieved, the patient need for information as well as the sources and contents preferred. RESULTS: Only 36.8 % of the patients collected information prior to their ophthalmic consultation. Other physicians (50 % of the cases) and other patients (33.3 % of cases) were the most frequent information sources. Information was mainly collected about the ophthalmologist (61.8 % of the cases), and about the own eye diseases (20.6 %). Only 2.8 % of the patients spent more than 3 hours looking for information. 94.7 % of the patients wished to be orally informed in the practice. 74.7 % preferred to be informed only or also by the physician. CONCLUSIONS: Most ophthalmic patients do not represent the ideal of an informed patient. Without additional education they do not appear to have the knowledge or skill required for taking the responsibility for their own health.