

Sunglasses: Healthy Eyes are Always in Style



If you buy a new pair of sunglasses each season, there's a good chance that you want something stylish, a pair of shades that accent your looks and make a fashion statement. While there's nothing wrong with this, you need to take a closer look at what you're buying. After all, fashion means little if those brand new sunglasses fail at the most important purpose – protecting your eyes from the harmful effects of the sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays year-round.

Yes, the sun can cause damage to more than your skin. Those harmful UV rays can lead to a host of vision problems, some severe.

But there's good news. You can get the look you want by shopping smart.

Why Looks Aren't Everything

It's important to understand the need for sunglasses in protecting your vision while outside:

- **UV Protection:** The sun's UV rays can damage the skin of the eyelid as well as the cornea, lens and other parts of the eye. Even short-term, excessive exposure during a day at the beach could lead to photokeratitis. Often called "a sunburn of the eye" or "snow blindness," it's usually temporary but painful. Those UV rays can cause more serious conditions over the years, including cataracts, pterygium (an abnormal growth of the covering of the white of the eye onto the cornea), and cancer of the eyelids, skin around the eye and even the eye. Wearing wide-brimmed hats and caps only block about half of this radiation.

- **Blue-light Protection:** Long-term exposure may cause damage to the retina, which can lead to macular degeneration – the leading cause of blindness in adults in the United States. The blue and violet portion of the sun's rays has been shown to be a contributing factor in damaging the retina.

- **See Better:** Ever squint in the sun, find it hard to see objects, especially when driving, and have your eyes water? Bright sunlight and its glare simply impede your ability to see and see comfortably.

- **Dark Adaptation:** Chances are you've looked at a bright light and then found it difficult to see in darker conditions. Spend as little as two to three hours in the sun without sunglasses and you can hamper your eyes' ability to adapt when you step indoors.

Look for Protection

Healthy eyes never go out of style. To ensure that you buy sunglasses that assure protection, the AOA recommends:

- Lenses that block out 99 to 100 percent of both UV-A and UV-B rays.
- Screen out 75 to 90 percent of visible light.
- Ask your optometrist and optician to recommend the best lens color and darkness that ensures comfort and critical vision when driving or out in the sun.
- Lenses are perfectly matched in color and are free of distortion and imperfection.
- A frame that fits close to your eyes and contours to the shape of your face. This prevents exposure to UV rays from all sides, even from behind.
- Prescription glasses with tints and full UV protection. And while some contact lenses also offer UV protection, these should be worn with sunglasses to maximize your protection.

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Be Aware and Beware

For starters, no matter the age, sunglasses are a must. It's critical for children since their eyes are more transparent than an adult's, which makes it easier for UV rays to reach a child's retina.

There are no federal requirements that govern UV protection, light transmission levels or the lens quality of sunglasses.

The AOA and several other vision-related organizations strongly recommend that you look for sunglasses that block 99 to 100 percent of UV radiation.

Don't be fooled by the color or darkness of lenses. Neither factor solely determines the level of UV protection.

Protection First: Your Checklist

You can find sunglasses to fit your style but the AOA recommends that you shop for quality first so you buy sunglasses that offer the UV protection you need. Here are some items to make you a better shopper:

- Don't be confused or misled by UV labels. Ask your optometrist for advice.
- Check those lenses for a uniform tint, not darker in one area from another. Gradient lenses should lighten gradually from top to bottom. And the AOA suggests gray, which is especially important when driving, since this offers the best color recognition.
- Look closely to make sure the lenses are distortion-free. You can do this by looking through them at a straight line in the distance, such as the edge of a door. Slowly move the lens across the line. You'll see imperfections if the straight edge distorts, sways or curves.
- Your lenses need to block light so try them on in front of a mirror. Now, if you see your eyes too easily, the lenses probably aren't dark enough. The same test doesn't work on photochromic lenses, though, since these change color with light.

Sunglasses With a Purpose

Lenses and frames can enhance your vision for particular activities so you may need more than one pair of sunglasses. Here are some choices to consider:

- Polarized Lenses reduce reflected glare such as sunlight that bounces off snow or water. Consequently, these add comfort and enhance vision when cross-country skiing, fishing or driving.
- "Blue-blocking" Lenses help make distant objects easier to see, especially in snow or haze. That's great for skiers, boaters and hunters. But when driving make sure you can properly distinguish traffic lights.
- Photochromic Lenses offer convenience since the lens darkens or lightens with the amount of available light.
- Polycarbonate Lenses provide impact protection, a must for potentially hazardous work, sports and other activities. Other impact-resistant materials such as polyurethane and Trivex® are now offered as well.
- Gradient Tint Lenses are available either as single- or double-gradient. Single-gradient lenses are dark on the top, lighter on the bottom to reduce glare, which is useful while driving but not for playing sports. Double-gradient lenses are dark on top and bottom and lighter in the middle. This helps for water or winter sports but not for driving.
- Performance Tints help improve visual performance for certain activities. Consult your eye doctor for recommendations.
- Wraparound Frames are a good choice that add UV protection from all sides.