

Facts for Protecting Your Eyes from the Sun

Q&A with VSP Optometrist, Dr. Michelle Calder-Cardwell



Not only are sunglasses a fun fashion accessory, they are a protective necessity that should be worn year-round, in both the summer AND winter months. Yet many parents are unaware of the types of lenses they should choose for themselves and their children, what looks best, and how they can help protect eyes.

To explain helpful tips about sunwear, Dr. Michelle Calder-Cardwell, VSP® Vision Care Optometrist, answers these frequently asked questions:

Q: How does the sun hurt our eyes?

A: The sun contains a wide spectrum of radiation, some of which can be very damaging with high exposure, such as ultraviolet A (UVA) light and ultraviolet B (UVB) light. Both UVA and UVB are believed to cause cataracts, macular degeneration, and melanomas (cancerous growths both inside and around the eyes), all of which can cause blindness. However, by wearing sunglasses that block UVA and UVB rays, much of the damage from the sun can be prevented!

Q: What are the most important characteristics of sunglasses to protect our eyes?

A: Make sure the lenses block damaging UVA and UVB rays. Also, the more coverage the frame gives your face—both in size and how much it wraps around your face—the more it will protect your eyes. Tint is another important factor. Amber and brown tints offer more UV protection than grey tints, and solid tints typically offer more protection than gradient tints. Finally, consider glasses with polarized lenses, which cut down on glare from horizontal surfaces, such as water, pavement, sand, and snow.

Q: Do kids' sunglasses have different characteristics?

A: Along with UVA and UVB protective lenses, kids' glasses should also have a strap to help hold the frame in place, especially if the child wants to pull the sunglasses off. Also, it's critical to have trivex-material frames to protect from flying objects, and impact-resistant lenses such as polycarbonate, which vision insurance will sometimes cover in-full.

Q: What age should children start wearing sunglasses? If they refuse, what should parents do?

A: Parents are encouraged to get their children to wear sunglasses as soon as possible, especially during the brighter summer months. The earlier in life eyes are exposed to the sun's damaging rays, the more damaging the effects will be later on in life. Also, the sooner parents start putting sunglasses on their kids, the more likely they are to wear them. Just like it takes time for an infant to get used to hats and headbands, it takes time for children to get used to sunglasses. If a child still refuses to acclimate to sunglasses, then hats will help protect their eyes from the sun.

Q: What is the best method for choosing the most complimentary sunglasses for your face?

A: Heart-shaped faces (wide forehead, narrow chin) look best in cat-eye or round frames.

Square faces (square jaw with similar width as forehead) look best in cat-eye, round, or oval frames.

Oblong faces (long face with chin and cheeks of similar widths) look best in wrap styles or large frames.

Round faces (jaw and forehead with similar widths and wide cheekbones) look best in wide and rectangular frames.

Oval faces (forehead, cheekbones, and chin of similar widths) can wear most styles of frames because of their balanced shape.

You can check out frames that fit your face online at our eyewear gallery at member.vsp.com/gallery/.

Q: Can regular eyeglasses protect our eyes from the sun?

A: Yes! For sun protection, eyeglass lenses should have UVA and UVB protection, an anti-reflective coating, and photochromatic or light tint. An anti-reflective coating is important because it's virtually the only way to improve our night vision. It cuts down on glare and halos coming from headlights. It also provides aesthetics, reducing glare and reflections from the lenses so people can see your eyes, not distracting glare. Photochromatic lenses darken when exposed to UV light so they protect your eyes from the sun's damaging rays, as do tinted lenses.

Q: What is the most important thing to remember about fashion and eye health?

A: Protect your eyes with a good, stylish pair of glasses and/or sunglasses and look great while doing it! If you buy well-made glasses you're sure to get many years out of the frame, a lot of compliments, and the peace of mind of knowing you are investing in protecting one of your most valuable senses—your vision!