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Sunglasses Simplified

by Judith Lee

Here's how and why to protect your family's precious eyes

Busy folks who love the outdoors recognize that sunglasses are important, but often don't take the time to wade through all the options. Drs. Brad and Suzan Grimm, both optometric physicians and co-owners of Duvall Advanced Family EyeCare, say selecting the right pair of sunglasses is simple if you're equipped with a few important facts.

"Sunglasses are as important as sunscreen at the beach and a helmet, shin guards and knee pads for sports. Selecting the right pair is as simple as understanding how they work, and the relationship between high quality and performance," explains Dr. Brad Grimm.

Sunglass lenses offer important protection against harmful ultraviolet (UV) rays, can prevent eye injuries, and can make driving safer.

Even on an overcast day, harmful UV rays can cause damage to the eye, starting from the earliest age. A study shows that UV radiation contributes to certain types of cataract, and UV exposure at a very young age is worse than exposure in adulthood.

Another study finds that "exposure after the teenage years correlated with the presence of [cataracts] in females." Two other studies showed that high levels of exposure to sunlight may cause macular degeneration later in life.

Those who are active in boating, gardening, hiking, horseback riding, biking and golf should have medium to dark-tinted, polarized lenses that meet American National Standards Institute (ANSI) standards for "general purpose" sunglasses. Those who spend long hours in the sun or are in very bright environments (tropical beaches, mountain climbing and skiing) need the darkest lenses to block UVB and UVA rays.

Sunglasses purchased from a drugstore or mass retailer sometimes have lens flaws and warping that are difficult to detect. Optometrists recommend optical quality sunwear, which has superior optic quality and prescription lens options.

An example is Transitions® lenses that change from light to dark depending on the light conditions.

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"We are now prescribing Transitions VI, which are faster to fade dark, and are even clearer indoors than previous Transitions lenses. Transitions VI blocks 100 percent of all harmful UV rays," notes Dr. Suzan Grimm.

Even if you don't spend a lot of time outdoors, you most likely need sunglass lenses for driving. Polarized sunglasses can prevent misjudgments and accidents due to glare. These lenses contain a polarizer that blocks light (glare) reflected from surfaces like a flat road or smooth water.

Both Drs. Brad and Suzan Grimm often recommend a new type of lens, called Drivewear, which is a photochromic lens that darkens to a sunglass tint even behind a windshield (regular Transitions lenses can't do that).

Drivewear is also polarized to reduce glare, making it the first lens to combine the benefits of these technologies: in overcast light, Drivewear lenses have a green/yellow tint that enhances contrast; when bright sunlight comes through the windshield, the lenses automatically darken to a copper color that highlights greens and reds – making traffic signals easier to see; and outside the car in sunlight, the lenses turn a dark reddish brown.

Sunglass frames perform the same functions as an eyeglass frame: securely hold the lenses in place, protect the area around your eyes, flatter your features, make a fashion statement. "A quality frame will perform better and last longer. For instance, some quality frames can be twisted and flexed, and are less likely to break. This is important for sunglasses, as the wearer will remove them when coming indoors," Dr. Brad Grimm noted.

Even though sunglass boutiques carry sunglasses with higher-end frames, these are not offered in as many sizes and colors as offered at an eyewear boutique. A qualified optician or optometrist can fit a frame exactly to the wearer's face, without compromise on the face size and temple length.

Qualified eye doctors also offer warranties on lenses and frames, which often apply to the sunglasses you purchase from them. Insurance benefits often apply to prescription sunglasses.

Contact Lens Wearers should remember that contacts do not provide protection from the sun. When outdoors, they should wear sunglasses over their contact lenses. They also need prescription sunglasses to wear when they remove their contact lenses to swim at the pool or beach. Avid swimmers might need prescription swim goggles.

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