

Whether you're savouring the summer sun or bundling up for snowy days, don't forget to protect your peepers from ultraviolet (UV) rays.

According to Dr. Nana Owusu, a doctor of optometry and owner of Prairie Eye Care, it's important for people of all ages to wear UV-blocking sunglasses.

"There's no minimum age and there's no maximum age. Children, seniors and everyone in between should be wearing UV-blocking sunglasses to protect their eyes from the potential damage that the sun and UV rays can cause," he says, "Not all of my patients wear prescription glasses, but 100 per cent of them should be wearing sunglasses.

"As we age, we will all naturally develop cataracts, but the sun and UV (light) can speed up the progression of cataracts. Macular degeneration, which is a potentially blinding disease that can occur later in life, is also worsened by the sun and UV (light). UVA and UVB specifically are what we're concerned about. By wearing UV-blocking sunglasses, we can reduce the risk of some of those eye issues that can occur later in life."

It's especially important for kids to protect their eyes.

"Children generally have much larger pupils so their eyes are receiving much more light than everyone else. I believe it's important to start that protection early — if for no other reason than at least to develop the habit," Dr. Owusu says, "Once they get used to wearing sunglasses, it's something that kids typically enjoy because they are much more comfortable in the sun."

The same way we protect our skin with sunscreen, we should also protect our eyes with sunglasses.

"We should remember that it's not just about fashion, although sunglasses can be very fashionable," Dr. Owusu says. "It's important to read labels when purchasing sunglasses. The

label should indicate a minimum of UV 400 protection or 99 to 100 per cent UV blocking."

High prices or trendy brand names don't always indicate the best product.

"You don't necessarily have to spend excessive amounts of money. There are good UV-protecting sunglasses that are not overly expensive," Dr. Owusu says, "We don't have to disregard fashion, but we should always remember the most important function of our sunglasses: protection."

Glasses-wearers have the option of wearing prescription sunglasses or Transitions lenses.

"For those who prefer to have one pair of glasses, Transitions lenses can be very convenient," Owusu says. "These lenses darken under direct UV exposure and lighten when you move indoors. They are a great option, but it should be noted that they don't darken as much inside a vehicle when the windshield and roof are blocking the UV rays. I actually wear prescription sunglasses myself."

Hats can also be effective to block rays from the top and sides of the glasses frame.

People who spend a lot of time on the water might want to choose polarized lenses which also help reduce glare.

"They don't necessarily provide any more UV protection, but you can significantly reduce the glare reflecting off the water," Owusu says.

On sunny days, sunglasses seem like an obvious choice, but Owusu also stresses their importance in cloudy or snowy weather.

"In a place like Manitoba where we get a lot of snow, it's very important that we protect our eyes in the winter months as well," Owusu says.

"We shouldn't be forgetting about our sunglasses when there's snow on the ground. The glare off the snow is very strong and we can get a fair amount of UV rays reflecting off the snow, just as we do from direct sunlight.

"I wear sunglasses all the time myself. Even when it's slightly cloudier, there are still UV rays coming through, so it's important to protect ourselves as much as possible. At the end of the day, simply putting on a pair of sunglasses takes little effort, but it can help ensure optimal health for the only pair of eyes we have."

