

EYE-Q

by R. Thomas Barowsky, MD

Protecting Your Eyes from the Elements

January has been designated National Eye Healthcare Month by the National Institute's National Eye Institute. It is a chance for us to talk about how we can keep our eyes healthy and our vision clear. Today's column will focus on protecting our eyes from the elements.

You probably notice that the winter sun always seems brighter and gives more discomfort to our eyes than the sun throughout the rest of the year. The reason for this is that the sun is closer to the earth in the winter so its brightness is more intense. By wearing a good quality pair of sunglasses you will reduce that discomfort significantly. Be sure that any tinted eyewear you choose has a UV filter that filters out 100% of ultraviolet light to protect your eyes from UV damage. In addition, a good pair of sunglasses will also have an antireflective coating to aid in reducing glare. Other coatings and filters are also available such as polarizers and mirrors. Depending on your outdoor activities these may be beneficial or not.

Wearing a brimmed hat is also a good way to keep the sun and its UV rays out of our eyes. 50% of direct sunlight can be blocked this way. Obviously, if you're out skiing, snowmobiling, fishing, or whatever, it won't do anything for the light reflected off the water or snow.

Another bothersome problem with winter weather is the extreme dryness of the air. Patients with dry eye problems are always more uncomfortable during the winter months than at other times because that cold dry air will cause the eyes to become even more irritated and tearing then is a lot worse. If you have dry eye problems or are bothered by the winter wind, a pair of sunglasses that have a means of blocking out the wind will make the outdoors more enjoyable. If you are not into the boxy styles that fit over a regular pair of glasses, you might consider some of the newer designs in protective eyewear that incorporate a removable gasket to seal around the eyes. Many of my dry eye patients have been very satisfied with this design for several reasons:

- They offer good protection from the wind and help prevent drying
- They offer protection from airborne dust and debris when the gasket is in place
- They offer many coating options to meet the needs of most patients
- The patient's prescription can be ground into the lenses
- They work well for many different lifestyles from the very active to the sedate
- They can be used as safety glasses without looking like safety glasses
- They are affordable
- They are fashionable

I personally like the Wiley-X brand of eyewear for the simple reason that their patented removable gasket seal is virtually invisible and that they are the only protective eyewear approved for use by the men and women of our U.S. Military's elite Special Forces. In addition, they can be fit with your personal eyeglass prescription. The important thing to remember, regardless of brand or style, is how well they block wind, dust and sun yet still provide clear and unobstructed vision.

So enjoy your winter activities and keep a healthy outlook on life with the proper eye protection.

If you have questions about your eye health e-mail Dr. Barowsky at doctom@tdkj.com and we'll try to answer your questions here at Eye-Q.