

The glaring risks of winter: The vision-saving role of sunglasses in the cold



Anyone who has watched the winter Olympics understands the necessity for sunglasses even on the coldest, shortest day of the year. Snow can be blindingly reflective— sometimes literally.

And the cold, while it diminishes the sun's heat, doesn't reduce the sun's glare or potential damage to the eyes. In fact, the winter sun may actually be more harmful to our eyes than the summer sun since it sits lower in the winter sky and at a different angle that may expose us to more ultraviolet rays and glare. ¹ Some reports indicate the snow reflects nearly 80 percent of the sun's harmful rays. ²

Reflecting on sunglasses in winter

So don't let the single digits dupe you. The sun is one tough cookie year round, and in the winter it has the help of eye-drying wicked winds. If you don't respect its power by wearing eye protection, you may find yourself with one of the following common wintertime vision issues.

Snow blindness: This condition is proof you can get sunburned in the winter. Medically known as photokeratitis, snow blindness is similar to a sunburned cornea. It results from unprotected exposure to sunlight reflecting off of the ice, snow and water, particularly at high elevations where the air is thinner. That said, snow blindness may also refer to the freezing of the corneal surface. ³ To prevent snow blindness, wear eye protection, especially when skiing.

Snow glare: Another cause of snow blindness, glare is caused by horizontal light waves that reflect off of surfaces and strike our eyes at a similar angle. ⁴ Polarized lenses are the go-to source of eye protection for reducing glare, but be sure the lenses also carry 100 percent UV protection to protect against damaging rays.

Dry eyes: If the sun is a tough cookie, then the wind is its rougher sidekick when it comes to dry eyes. Cold winds, along with the dry heat indoors, cause the moisture in our eyes to evaporate too quickly. Our tear glands then can't keep up replacing the moisture. ⁵ This can be more than a discomfort—severe drying of the corneal surface may also lead to snow blindness. ⁶ Use eye drops to ease discomfort and wear wraparound sunglasses even on overcast days, as they will help shield your eyes from harsh winds and prevent watery reflex tears that do not keep the eyes hydrated. ⁷

So while you're piling on that extra fleece, scarf and pair of mittens, be sure to grab something to cover up your eyes as well. Also, be sure to choose for your winter sport the right sunglasses with 100 percent UV protection, polarization and strong, polycarbonate lenses.

To learn about six optical oddities of the winter, visit our Eye Site on Wellness

1. "Protecting Your Eyes During the Winter," Rebuild Your Vision, <http://www.rebuildyourvision.com/blog/sunglasses/protecting-your-eyes-during-the-winter/>
2. "Let the Sunshine In, but Not the Harmful Rays," by Lesley Alderman, The New York Times, Jan. 14, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/01/15/health/15patient.html
3. "What Is Photokeratitis (Including Snow Blindness)" EyeSmart, <http://www.geteyesmart.org/eyesmart/diseases/photokeratitis-including-snow-blindness/>
4. "Let the Sunshine In, but Not the Harmful Rays," by Lesley Alderman, The New York Times, Jan. 14, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/01/15/health/15patient.html
5. "Dry, Sticky Eyes During Winter?: 8 Tips to Get Through It!" All About Dry Eye, Jan. 15, 2013 <http://allaboutdryeye.com/2013/01/15/dry-sticky-eyes-during-winter-8-tips-to-get-through-it/#sthash.BswUNQ7B.dpuf>
6. "What Is Photokeratitis (Including Snow Blindness)" EyeSmart, <http://www.geteyesmart.org/eyesmart/diseases/photokeratitis-including-snow-blindness/>
7. "Dry, Sticky Eyes During Winter?: 8 Tips to Get Through It!" All About Dry Eye, Jan. 15, 2013 <http://allaboutdryeye.com/2013/01/15/dry-sticky-eyes-during-winter-8-tips-to-get-through-it/#sthash.BswUNQ7B.dpuf>

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