

Millions in danger of developing preventable cataracts in later life - widespread ignorance of year-round risk to eye health from UV light revealed by SelectSpecs.com survey

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Major misconceptions about risks of UV exposure explains high levels of age-related eye conditions

- Half of survey sample don't think sunglasses necessary in winter
- Vast majority unaware that 90% of UV rays still penetrate overcast skies
- 65% don't realise how likely they are to develop cataracts after age 70
- Almost 20% would look directly at the sun through sunglasses or telescope!

THE DAMAGING effects of UV rays on our eyes during the winter is just as great as in summer but widespread ignorance of the facts means that millions are putting themselves at risk of developing cataracts in later life, according to a new survey by online glasses retailer SelectSpecs.com (see below for full results).

Nearly 50% of respondents said they rarely or never wear sunglasses in winter and the vast majority – 82.4% - did not know that on an overcast day as much as 90% of the sun's harmful UV rays still penetrate the clouds.

"The season for sunglasses may be over but just because the sun isn't blazing it doesn't mean it isn't causing damage to our eyes," said Tony Russell, registered dispensing optician at SelectSpecs.com. "We associate sunglasses with holidays and looking stylish – good reasons for wearing them, of course – but the most important function is to protect our eyes and that is needed all year round.

"There's a big misconception that our eyesight deteriorates with age simply because we get older, and whilst this is true in some respects, it's actually a lifetime of exposure to UV light that exacerbates macula degeneration, cataracts and other eye conditions," said Tony. "If we protect our eyes all year round from childhood our chances of retaining good eye health and vision into old age are greatly increased."

When asked what percentage of the population will suffer from cataracts by the age of 70 as a result of exposure to UV light, 65% of people surveyed greatly underestimated how widespread this problem is. The fact is that 70% of 70-year-olds will have developed some form of this very common and debilitating but preventable condition*.

Staggeringly, nearly 20% would look directly at the sun, either with the naked eye, through sunglasses or a telescope or during a solar eclipse. "This is extremely unwise," said Tony. "Even the briefest of looks at the sun can temporarily bleach the retina and when viewed through a telescope the damage is even greater because the rays are magnified."

It's certainly a good thing that sunglasses have become such a fashion item as many more people are protecting their eyes on a regular basis as a result, but not all are making the right choices. A third

of those surveyed are getting their priorities wrong by putting design above UV protection when buying sunglasses. Thankfully, many top designers can be trusted to offer 100% UV protection but the same cannot be said for counterfeit designer glasses.

The approach of the ski-ing season is a good example of a time when good quality UV protection is even more important than ever. UV rays are more harmful at high altitudes but more than half thought that there is either no difference between the two or that low altitude light is more damaging, potentially putting their sight at risk.

“Changing habits from childhood is vital if we are to reduce the number of older people with eye damage,” said Tony. “The big rise in skin melanoma in recent years has greatly increased public awareness of the need to protect our skin from the sun but the same understanding is yet to extend to eyes.

“Education is what’s needed. It’s enlightening to see that nearly 50% of our survey wore neither a sun hat nor sunglasses on sunny days when they were children. Considering that 80% of UV damage to eyes happens before the age of 18*, the risk of these people developing age-related macula degeneration or cataracts is much higher than those who did protect their eyes.

“We really have to hit home the message that parents need to protect their children’s eyes and then hopefully it will become second nature, just as the use of sunscreen is today.

“Of course, this applies to prescription glasses as well as sunglasses which is why all prescription glasses from SelectSpecs.com come with UV400 protection as standard, along with anti-scratch and anti-reflective coatings. These should never be charged for as an added extra because of the chances of people going without to save money. We believe that is an irresponsible commercial tactic.

“If we protect our eyes with UV coated glasses wherever possible from childhood onwards, the damage will be less – it’s as simple as that.”

SELECTSPECS.COM SURVEY RESULTS

conducted online 24 September-8 October 2010

49.8% rarely or never wear sunglasses in winter to protect their eyes

82.4% were unaware that on an overcast day 90% of harmful UV rays penetrate the clouds

66.5% were unaware that cataracts affect 70% of the population by age 70

18.2% would look directly at the sun with the naked eye, through a telescope or binoculars or during a solar eclipse

53.7% were unaware that UV rays are more harmful at high altitudes

33.2% consider design is more important than UV protection when buying sunglasses

49.5% did not wear sunglasses or a hat on sunny days as a child

– ENDS –

* Dispensing Optics magazine, March 2010 (journal of the Association of British Dispensing Opticians)

Notes to Editors:

About SelectSpecs.com www.selectspecs.com

SelectSpecs.com is one of the UK's long-standing online glasses retailers and has been in business in Westgate-on-Sea, Kent, since 2004. SelectSpecs.com is committed to offering consumers the biggest range of prescription glasses and designer sunglasses at unbeatable prices. Prices start at just £6 for complete frames and prescription lenses – there are no cheaper glasses to be found in the world. All lenses come with anti-scratch, anti-reflection and UV coatings as standard at no extra charge.

As an online glasses retailer, SelectSpecs.com has no need for an expensive high street store to display their glasses and sunglasses, meaning they can pass on savings of up to 80% to the customer.

SelectSpecs.com is not just a website. It offers a personal advice service provided by the company's own registered dispensing opticians.

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