

## **Misinformation around online eyewear purchases highlights need for public eye health education**

With many optometrists' offices still closed due to COVID-19, more Canadians may be considering purchasing glasses or contact lenses online. In a growing online economy and in the presence of provincial deregulation that allows consumers to order eyewear without a prescription, online purchasing will continue and likely increase.

That's a concern for many optometrists, who worry that, by opting for online purchases, consumers may be missing out on preventative eye care—and putting their vision at risk.

A recent focus group study on Canadians' knowledge of eye health conducted by researchers at the University of Waterloo provides insight into the minds of today's eyewear consumers. It also uncovers an alarming gap in communication around the importance of preventative eye care.

Knowledge translation specialist Alisa Sivak conducted the research in collaboration with Drs. Elizabeth Irving and Marlee Spafford of the University's School of Optometry & Vision Science. In an editorial in [\*Ophthalmic and Physiological Optics\*](#), Sivak notes that the sense of alarm around the online purchasing of eyewear needs to shift to a focus on helping consumers make good decisions regardless of where they're purchasing eyewear.

"People in the study expressed both interest and concern around purchasing eyewear online," Sivak says. "Their responses also seemed to show a disconnect between purchasing eyewear and seeking regular eye care."

That's a problem, Sivak says, because it indicates that consumers don't fully understand the importance of routine eye examinations.

"These results echo our earlier research, which found that many people feel the main reason for an eye exam is to get a prescription for glasses or contact lenses, not eye health," says Irving, the study's principal investigator.

"They also believe that if they don't have symptoms of an eye problem, their eyes are healthy. Unfortunately, many serious eye diseases are asymptomatic; the only way to detect them is through a comprehensive eye exam, which can also detect serious systemic diseases, like diabetes."

The study, Sivak says, underscores the need to provide strong and consistent public education and guidance so that consumers can make informed decisions about their eye health. Online eyewear purchases must not translate into less frequent eye exams.

“This is a challenge to the eye care profession. Online purchasing is not going away. We need to work together with governments and health organizations to create consistent messaging that not only resonates with the public but provides the information they need to protect their vision.”

## **Reference**

Sivak, A., Spafford, M., & Irving, E. (2020, April) Patient views about online purchasing of eyewear. *Ophthalmic and Physiological Optics*, 40. [Editorial]. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1111/opo.12689>

*From the University of Waterloo School of Optometry & Vision Science*