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Glasses now against the rules

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A NEW LAW in New Jersey aims to better protect the eyes of young athletes and, like most things in life, it comes with a price tag.

Signed in January by then-Gov. Richard Codey and effective July 11, the legislation requires any athletes through 12th grade who wear corrective eyeglasses to wear protective eyewear.

The mandate covers sports sponsored by a school, community or government agency and applies to racquetball, squash, tennis, basketball, field hockey, badminton, paddleball, soccer, volleyball, baseball, softball and women's lacrosse.

The eyewear costs between \$100 and \$200, according to Paul Berman, a Bergen County optometrist who said he lobbied for and helped craft the legislation. Berman is director of education for Liberty Sport of Fairfield, a national distributor of the Rec Specs brand of protective eyewear.

Purchase of the sports eyewear will be the responsibility of athletes and their families. But Liberty Sport, in partnership with Carl Zeiss Vision, is developing a program that would make the eyewear available at a lower cost (\$29.95 to \$39.95) to low-income families with children on Medicaid, Berman said.

The new requirement targets only children who already wear corrective glasses, according to Assemblyman Joseph Malone (R-Burlington), a primary sponsor of the law. Malone explained that regular eyeglasses present their own threat of serious eye damage on top of the potential injuries a ball, bat, stick, finger or other object can inflict.

"Should every kid who does not need a prescription be wearing (protective eyewear)? Probably not," said Malone, explaining why the law doesn't pertain to kids who don't need corrective glasses. "They're not used to wearing eyewear, and it could be more of a distraction" for those children.

"Regardless of whether a person needs glasses or not, if he's on the court with eye protection on, it has to be the appropriate eye protection. It cannot be street eyeglasses," Malone said.

Berman said that, ideally, he'd like to see every athlete wear protective eyewear.

The law also stipulated that no school, community or government agency "engaged in organizing, teaching, refereeing or coaching" any of the sports included in the legislation would

be liable in a civil action "for failure to administer or enforce the protective eyewear requirement."

Providing immunity from civil liability is "a normal precaution," Malone said. "If you mandate something, you don't want to create an additional liability" for entities such as schools.

The legislation also doesn't call for any penalties to be imposed for lack of enforcement. "The decision was made that we don't want to have the eyeglass police," Berman explained. "We felt just making this the law would enable people to realize how important this is."

Ophthalmologist Robert Scharfman, president of the New Jersey Academy of Ophthalmology, applauded the measure as good common sense. "You wouldn't let a football player onto the field without shoulder pads. If you understand that it's part of the safety gear you must wear, it becomes something that's just accepted and has to be done.

"Sports eye injuries in young children are quite devastating," Scharfman said. "This is a very good decision. It will cut down on injuries and protect children."

The American Academy of Ophthalmology and the American Academy of Pediatrics jointly adopted a policy three years ago that strongly recommends protective eyewear for all participants in sports that pose a risk of eye injury.

There are about 40,000 sports-related eye injuries every year, according to the American Academy of Ophthalmology, and 90 percent of them are preventable with the use of protective eyewear. Basketball is the number one cause of eye injuries in kids 15 to 24, said Scharfman, while baseball is the major cause of eye injuries in children 5 to 14.

Eye injuries run the gamut from corneal abrasions to blunt trauma to penetration injuries that can lead to blindness or the loss of an eye, according to Prevent Blindness America.

Sports protective eyewear can look similar to goggles and comes equipped with an elastic band that wraps around the back of the head for a secure fit. Scharfman said the eyewear can be highly effective in protecting the eye, in part, because the lenses are made of polycarbonate, a virtually shatter-proof material that can sustain the impact of a ball or a finger.

The force of a blow on the goggle-shaped eyewear will be distributed over the bony structure of the eye instead of being directed to the eyeball, Scharfman explained.

Coaches in the sports community said they were behind the need to protect the eyes of young athletes. But some also raised concerns about the decision to mandate protective eyewear.

"I understand about the safety of kids as much as anyone, as a father and a coach. But the problem I have is, every time we do one of these types of laws, the ramifications might be greater than anyone thought," said Tom Fleming, who coaches cross-country and track and field at Montclair Kimberley Academy. Fleming said student athletes and coaches already operate under numerous restrictions and rules, including a ban on wearing jewelry that can cause injuries to other players and pay-to-play requirements by some organized sports teams.

"Being a student athlete today is harder than it ever was," Fleming said. "It seems like we're doing everything we can to make kids not do sports."

"It's a good law but it's not going to be an earth-shattering law because there's simply not that

many people wearing eyeglasses" at the high school level, said Phil Hossler, certified athletic trainer for the East Brunswick school district. "If I have 500 athletes at practice right now, I'd say 250 of them wear corrective lenses, but I can't see them because they're all wearing contacts," said Hossler, who's based at East Brunswick High School.

Hossler also questioned the need for a mandate that provides no sanctions for noncompliance. "Then don't pass a law, just pass a recommendation. Is it a good recommendation? Absolutely."

Malone, the sponsor of the law, said coaches should ensure compliance by benching kids who don't want to wear their protective eyewear.

Hossler said he thinks the law would apply more to athletes younger than the high school level, who are at an age when they might not be ready for the responsibility of wearing contact lenses.

After receiving notification about the law from her son's soccer coach, Debra Embree, of Randolph, cited the "huge expense" two weeks ago when she bought Evan, 11, a pair of sports protective goggles.

"Most parents find it's an extra expense because you're already investing in eyeglasses, so you're doubling your expense, you're buying a double pair of glasses."

Still, she considers it a good investment because she thinks it will improve his safety. Besides, Evan will be using them a lot. "I'm looking at four seasons of wear. He does sports during the winter and in the spring, he's hoping for soccer and/or baseball in the summer. He's an avid biker. He just likes moving."

Until he got the protective eyewear, said Embree, Evan would sometimes participate in sports without wearing his corrective eyeglasses to protect them from bending or breaking. "It's really good to be able to see the game you're playing."

Evan said, before he got the protective eyewear, his sports performance was negatively affected even when he wore his glasses. "I wasn't being as physical and active in the game as much as I could because I was afraid I was going to break my glasses."

With the sports eyewear, he said, "I can run much better, I'm more aggressive and active in the game and I participate more."

Here are some tips on what to look for when searching for sports protective eyewear for your child. You can find this type of eyewear at most establishments that sell corrective glasses.

- Make sure you buy eyewear with polycarbonate lenses. Polycarbonate is very resistant to impact and is virtually shatter-proof. This material is thinner and lighter than traditional plastic lenses, offers ultraviolet protection and is scratch-resistant.
- Make sure the eyewear is a good fit for your child and avoid the temptation to buy oversized eyewear that appears to be loose. It has to fit well to perform well.
- The new law stipulates the sports protective eyewear must conform to the requirements of the American Society for Testing and Materials Standard F803. You'll know the eyewear you're considering meets this standard because "F803" will be stamped on it.
- Be aware that the new law also requires that eyewear meet American National Standards Institute lens standard Z87.1. Z87.1 Plus offers even more protection, according to ophthalmologist Paul Vinger, clinical professor of ophthalmology at Tufts University and an expert on protective eyewear.

- Different types of protective eyewear are appropriate for different sports. The packaging of the eyewear you're interested in should list the sports for which it's designed.
- Make sure your protective eyewear has received the certification seal of the Protective Eyewear Certification Council. PECC provides a third-party certification service in which an independent, authorized laboratory tests the eyewear to verify meets the required standards. The PECC certification seal isn't required on the product packaging, but there's a list of protective eyewear products that have received the certification online at www.protecteyes.org.

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