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# Life After Lasik: A Clear-Eyed Urge To Wear Glasses

*Specs Are Looking Hot On Runway Models; The No-Rx Frame-Up*

By RAY A. SMITH

**Los Angeles eye surgeon Robert K. Maloney** was shocked when he bumped into a former patient who was wearing glasses.

"I was horrified," **says Dr. Maloney**, who had performed Lasik surgery on the man to correct his farsightedness. "I went up to him gingerly and asked, 'Is everything OK?'"

The patient, Steve Wallace, says, yes, his vision is fine -- he just likes wearing glasses. "It's a fashion statement," says the 66-year-old owner of Wally's, a Los Angeles wine store. "It's my signature." People "come up to me and ask, 'Where did you get your glasses?'"

Lasik surgery, a common procedure to correct vision defects by reshaping the cornea with a laser, was supposed to make spectacles unnecessary for many people. In a Botox era obsessed with youth and physical perfection, the surgery wasn't seen as just corrective, but also cosmetic: Ditching the four-eyes look was part of the payoff.

But amid a push by glasses makers, as well as fashion designers with their own eyewear lines, nonprescription glasses have become a hot accessory. Earlier this year, designers including Michael Kors and Carmen Marc Valvo featured models wearing bold rectangular glasses in their runway shows. "I cannot recall ever seeing models in specs on major runways before this year," says David Wolfe, a fashion-industry consultant who has tracked the trade for decades.

Designers have never been shy about outfitting models with scarves, shoes and bags from their collections. But "they never made passes at models with glasses," says Mr. Wolfe, who needs glasses to see and is a big fan of the trend.

The LensCrafters chain, once known for dowdy ads touting discounts and quick service, now uses supermodels like Heidi Klum to hawk its wares in fashion magazines like Vogue. It has redecorated stores with chandeliers, flowers and leather benches to make shopping for glasses seem less medical. Another addition: full-length mirrors to let customers check out their complete look.

Ads in magazines ranging from GQ to New York are no longer limited to designer

sunglasses. Prada and Gucci are among the brands featuring models posed wearing retro-looking rectangular frames (think Buddy Holly). High-end eyewear brand Oliver Peoples now releases four collections a year, up from two two years ago, hoping customers will want to change frames as often as they, perhaps, switch handbags.

All this appears to be working. While trade groups and retailers say they don't track sales of non-Rx glasses specifically, upscale eyewear retailer Morgenthal Frederics estimates sales of glasses with nonprescription lenses at its seven stores are expected to rise 50%, to 500 pairs this year, compared with 2005.

Eyewear boutique Robert Marc, with eight stores in Manhattan and one in Boston, says that in the past two years, it has seen a fivefold increase in requests for glasses from people who don't actually need them to see.

[Luxottica Group](#) SpA, owner of more than 6,000 eyewear stores world-wide, including LensCrafters and Pearle Vision stores, says U.S. store managers have reported steady increases in sales like these. Buyers are quite frank about not needing a prescription, particularly in cities like New York and Los Angeles and mainly among artists, architects and other creative types.

Even clothing stores such as American Apparel are selling retro nonprescription glasses. Creative director Iris Alonzo says three years ago, its eyewear collection was 90% sunglasses and 10% vintage nonprescription glasses. Today, it's 60/40.

"We started out selling a few frames, telling customers they could have the frame filled with their prescription," she says. "When sales started going up, we realized that half the people buying them don't even need a prescription."

Lasik surgery itself is suffering a slowdown amid the weaker economy. Volumes peaked in 2000 at about 1.4 million procedures, according to research firm Market Scope LLC, which expects a 17% decline this year. At the same time, the Food and Drug Administration is taking a closer look at complaints from a number of patients who experienced aftereffects including blurred vision. ([See related article.](#))

None of that matters to Lauren Messiah, a nearsighted 27-year-old Web site marketer in Los Angeles who wears contact lenses -- and then wears fake eyeglasses at the same time. Earlier this year, after noticing models wearing glasses during runway shows in New York and Los Angeles, she bought several pairs of inexpensive nonprescription glasses in different colors. Wearing glasses helps her look more like "boss lady" in meetings, she says, and it's cheaper than buying loads of designer prescription frames.

On top of that, having a selection of frames on hand makes it easier for her to match her outfit. "If I got blue cat-eyed glasses, well, I can't wear blue cat-eyed glasses every day," she says.

Sometimes, putting on unneeded glasses isn't about fashion at all. [Dr. Maloney, the Los Angeles surgeon](#), notes that some patients keep wearing glasses after

Lasik surgery because they're part of a person's established look. **Dr. Maloney** says that in 1999, he performed Lasik on Drew Carey, the comedian and new host of "The Price Is Right" on CBS. But Mr. Carey kept wearing his signature glasses on TV or whenever he's in character.

Mr. Carey didn't reply to requests for comment.

Ocular fashion statements aren't always cheap. Jeffrey Brody had successful Lasik surgery three years ago, but he couldn't resist buying a \$400 pair of trendy nonprescription glasses from a Robert Marc store in New York last fall. "They dress up what you're wearing and finish off a look," says Mr. Brody, a director of business development for a New York rug company. He just bought two more pairs for spring.

Morgan Cullen, a 27-year-old fashion model and aspiring actress, wears nonprescription black rectangular Lacoste glasses in her portfolio to broaden her career prospects. "Uneducated people think models are dumb," says Ms. Cullen, who has 20/20 vision and whose father is an optometrist. Glasses, she says, "make people take you more seriously."

**Write to** Ray A. Smith at [ray.smith@wsj.com](mailto:ray.smith@wsj.com)

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