

Japanese men turn to parasols to beat the heat

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TOKYO —

It's summer in Japan, which means shaved ice, cold noodles and parasols against the blinding sun - for men.

While women have used sun umbrellas, or "higasa," for centuries, power conservation and increasingly hot summers have sent sales of men's sun umbrellas sharply higher, with department stores across Japan scrambling for stocks.

"There's been a spike in demand for men's sun umbrellas of about three times since last summer," said Mayumi Mio, a spokeswoman at Takashimaya, a major Tokyo department store.

"Most of them buy it for business when they have to step outside of the office to go to a meeting. They feel that it's rude to show up to work or a meeting all sweaty and worn out from the heat."

White, natural skin has long been thought beautiful for Asian women, and Japanese men have also become increasingly skin-conscious in recent years. But the real jump in sales came last summer, after power cuts in the wake of the March 11 disaster prompted new ways to beat the heat.

According to the Environment Ministry, the combination of casual business attire such as short sleeves and no tie, and a sun umbrella, can cut up to 20% of heat stress, providing almost the same impact as walking under the shade cast by trees.

Kazuhiro Miyatake, the fourth generation to own and run the Shinsaibashi-Miyatake umbrella specialty store in the western city of Osaka,

feels it's high time that men be able to carry parasols as well, if they want.

"It's your own portable shade you can carry around anywhere," he said.

While women's parasols run to lighter colors - pink, beige, white and red as well as black - those for men are more sombre shades of blue, grey, and green. They also tend to be larger.

Prices can run from as little as 2,000 yen up to 17,000 yen, depending on the design and the materials.

"I believe if there was a 'sun umbrella God,' I'm positive it wouldn't discriminate between men and women," said Miyatake, who sells a thousand a year. "If men want to use sun umbrellas, they should be able to without shame."

Questions:

1. Do you think sun umbrellas should be reserved for women only? Why? Why not?
2. Have you ever seen a man with a sun umbrella? What is your opinion on this matter?
3. If you are a woman, would you date a man who uses a sun umbrella? Why? Why not? If you are a man, have you ever considered using one? Why? Why not?
4. In your opinion, is it true that in recent times men have become more and more skin conscience? And does it have anything to do with the fact that Japanese men, especially young Japanese men, are becoming herbivores?
5. Besides sun umbrellas, how are other ways you can beat the extreme Tokyo summer heat? Do you have any summer survival secrets?