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Total solar eclipses are rare, and many people in the U.S. will have to wait more than two decades for another. The next total solar eclipse visible from the contiguous U.S. will be on Aug. 23, 2044.

Proper eye protection must be worn throughout a total solar eclipse -- except for the roughly 3 1/2 to 4 minutes when the moon fully obscures the sun, a brief period known as "totality." (You will need to take your glasses off during totality to actually see it.)

Tammy Hellinga, left, and Joanne Hostetter prepare Sun Catcher solar eclipse glasses for shipment to customers from the Explore Scientific store in Springdale, Ark., on Jan. 30. Michael Woods/AP hide caption

Specialized eclipse glasses and hand-held solar viewers solve that problem. Their filters typically let through between 0.001% and 0.00005% of visible light, and they can be more than 1,000 times darker than ordinary sunglasses, the American Astronomical Society says.

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