

Protect Summer Fun from Eye-Damaging UV Rays

By Jonna Jefferis

One amazing thing about our bodies is their split-second response to imminent physical harm. For example, when you see an object flying directly toward your face, your eyes shut automatically in defense. Similarly, when you walk outdoors into bright sunlight without a hat or sunglasses, your eyes react defensively, and you squint. What danger is your body trying to protect you from? The sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays, which can physically harm eyes just as surely as a flying object can.

Because many people are not aware of the lasting eye damage that UV rays can cause, the American Academy of Ophthalmology has designated July as UV Safety Month to highlight the importance of outdoor eye protection.

How Sunlight Can Harm Eyes

UV rays are invisible, high-energy light beams that radiate from the sun all year round. They pass through haze and thin clouds, and reflect off bright surfaces, such as water, snow, white sand and pavement. Artificial light sources, such as tanning beds and welding machines, also produce UV radiation.

“The same UV rays that cause tanning, sunburn and skin cancer can also harm your eyes.”

Brief but intense UV contact may cause corneal sunburn, the most immediate danger to children's eyes from overexposure to the sun. It is rare and there is no permanent damage, but it can cause discomfort for a few days.

While short-term UV overexposure may cause immediate pain, the damage caused by long-term exposure develops so slowly that it is not felt. Without eye protection, small amounts of UV light over many years can aid the development of cataracts and age-related macular degeneration (AMD), leading causes of vision loss among older Americans. Long-term UV exposure may also contribute to the gradual development of skin cancer around the eyelids and abnormal growths on the eye's surface.

Who Is Most at Risk?

No one is immune to UV-related eye damage, which can occur during all daylight hours, year-round. Certain circumstances, however, put eyes at a greater risk:

- Young eyes. Children's eyes are especially vulnerable, as they are less able to provide sun protection than those of adults.
- Outdoors. Those who work or play in the sun for long periods need to be particularly careful.
- Indoors. UV radiation levels are much greater in a tanning booth than outdoors.
- When and where. Your risk of eye damage is highest between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m., and during summer. Where you live may be a factor, too, as UV levels increase closer to the equator and intensify at high altitudes.

Protection: Don Those Shades!

Whenever you are outdoors during the day, even during winter and on cloudy days, protect your eyes in the following ways:

- Wear sunglasses or prescription eyeglasses with photochromic (such as transitions®) lenses, or select lenses that filter out 99-100% of both UV-A and UV-B rays.
- Wear a wide-brimmed hat or cap, which will block about half of UV rays.
- Always wear protective goggles when using a tanning bed or welding machine.
- Eat a healthy diet. A diet rich in brightly colored fruits and vegetables helps reduce the risk of sun damage.
- Remember that UV rays reflect off bright surfaces, making it critical—especially for children—to wear sunglasses and hats at the beach, swimming pool or playground.

Proper eye protection will help maintain long-term eye health for you and your family, as well as keep your eyes comfortable and safe outdoors this summer.