

PROTECTING YOUR EYES FROM THE SUN

UV RAYS CAN BURN THE EYE WITH OVEREXPOSURE

SUNLIGHT AND YOUR EYES

The role that sunlight plays in aging skin and causing skin cancer has been well known for some time. Less well known but no less important is the effect of sunlight on your eyes and vision. Recent research indicates that the effect of UV rays from sunlight on your eyes may be more harmful than was previously suspected.

THE NATURE OF ULTRAVIOLET RAYS

Light energy travels in the form of waves, with different types of light having different wave lengths. Ultraviolet (UV) light rays, the harmful component in sunlight, are such "short" waves that they aren't apart of the visible light spectrum. Since the sun's UV-A and UV-B rays are invisible, we aren't aware of them and are unable to gauge their intensity.

HOW DOES SUNLIGHT HARM YOUR EYES?

Long-term overexposure of the eyes to sunlight seems to cause cumulative damage. The process may start at a very young age, and continue throughout adulthood. By the time damage becomes apparent, irreparable conjunctival, corneal, lens, or retinal harm may have occurred.

Cataracts, which affect nearly 1 in 4 of those over age 75, are most commonly found in those with lifelong UV exposure. Overexposure to sunlight is also believed to play a role in the deterioration of central vision caused by damage to the macula in the retina.

WHO IS AT RISK

People who spend a lot of time outside or who work outdoors must take extra precautions to protect themselves from harmful UV rays. Those with blue or light-colored eyes, which admit more light into the eye, are most susceptible to damage from UV radiation.

Infants and children also need special protection. Often, they spend more time outdoors than adults and with their more translucent cornea and lens, their young eyes let more UV rays inside.

Recent discoveries indicate that the earth's ozone layer which protects us from much of the harmful UV radiation from sunlight may be breaking down due to environmental pollution. This may put all of us at a greater risk for increased exposure to UV radiation.

HOW TO SAFEGUARD YOUR EYES FROM UV RADIATION

The two main ways to protect your eyes from UV radiation is by limiting exposure time and wearing proper protective gear. And remember, your eyes need protection at all times of the year, not just in the summer!

Be aware of the period when sunlight is most intense and potentially damaging to your eyes. Try to schedule yard work and sports activities earlier than 10 a.m. or later than 3 p.m. whenever possible. Wear a wide-brimmed hat when outdoors. This can block up to 50% of UV rays that reach the eyes.

Prescription eyeglasses with plastic lenses offer some protection from UV rays - more protection than glass lenses. Soft contact lenses provide very little protection. The wisest course is not to rely on your prescription eyewear for UV protection.

The best protection however, is sunglasses that are rated to block 99-100 of both UV-A and UV-B rays. Look for large size lenses that fit snugly to provide good coverage for your eyes. "Wrap-around" styles are especially effective.

The color or darkness of lenses has no bearing on UV protection. Dark glasses that don't block UV rays can cause

pupils to dilate letting in more damaging UV light into the eyes. Since labels on sunglasses can often be misleading, it's a good idea to consult your eye doctor.

ONE MORE WAY TO PROTECT YOUR EYES

Schedule a thorough eye examination annually, especially after the age of 40. Your eye doctor can detect any damage from UV radiation as well as other vision disorders that occur with maturity.