

Lifewire: UV exposure, wind, dust are hard on the eyes

by Ven_Griva

July is Ultraviolet Safety Month, and the Academy of Ophthalmology wants to remind Americans to wear sunglasses and a broad-brimmed hat whenever they head out into the sun.

Academy scientists warn that one of the greatest threats to eyesight are the invisible ultraviolet rays emitted by the sun. More and more scientific evidence shows that long-term exposure to UV rays can damage eyes and lead to vision loss. Everyone is at risk, even children.

Studies show that exposure to bright sunlight can increase the risk of developing cataracts and age-related macular degeneration, both leading causes of vision loss among older adults. What's more, the damage accumulates over time.

UV exposure, wind and dust can also cause pterygia, benign growths on the eye's surface. The more exposure to bright light, the greater the chance of developing these eye conditions.

"Sun damage to eyes can occur anytime during the year, not just in the summertime," said Seattle ophthalmologist Dr. Richard Bensinger. "Although July is designated as UV Safety Month, you should protect your eyes from damage all year long."

The Academy of Ophthalmology recommends the following steps to protect your eyes from the sun:

- Select sunglasses that block ultraviolet rays. And remember, the ability to block UV light is not dependent on the darkness of the lens or price tag.
- Make sure your sunglasses block 99 percent or 100 percent of UV rays and UV-B rays.
- Ideally, sunglasses should wrap around from temple to temple so solar radiation is blocked from entering from the side.
- In addition to sunglasses, wear a broad-brimmed hat for eye protection.

- Don't be fooled by a cloudy day. Solar rays pass through haze and clouds.
- Even if you wear contacts with UV protection, sunglasses are still recommended.
- Sunglasses are especially helpful in the early afternoon, when the sun's rays are brighter, and at higher elevations, where UV radiation is more intense.

SUN SAFETY

Summer is the season for fun in the sun. Unfortunately, it is also the time of year when people are most likely to overexpose themselves to the sun's burning rays.

What's more, the danger goes way beyond sunburn. The vast majority of skin cancers are due to unprotected ultraviolet radiation exposure, say the experts at the American Cancer Society.

Most UV radiation comes from sunlight, but some comes from artificial sources, such as tanning booths, the society says. The amount of UV exposure depends on the strength of the light, the length of exposure, and whether skin is protected.

The short-term results of unprotected exposure to UV rays are sunburn and tanning. Long-term exposure causes prematurely aged skin, wrinkles, loss of elasticity, dark patches, sometimes called "age spots" or "liver spots," and actual skin cancers.

The American Cancer Society estimates more than 1 million new cases of highly curable cell skin cancers will be diagnosed in 2007.

The Environmental Protection Agency provides the following tips for avoiding sunburn and other more dangerous conditions that come from exposure to ultraviolet rays.

- Don't tan, don't burn: Ultraviolet light from tanning beds and the sun causes skin cancer and wrinkling. Therefore, UV light should be avoided. If you want to look like you've been in the sun, consider using a sunless self-tanning product, but continue to use sunscreen with it.

- The right protection: Apply sunscreen to all exposed skin using a sun protection factor, or SPF, of at least 15 that provides broad-spectrum protection from both ultraviolet A, or UVA, and ultraviolet B, or UVB, rays.

- More is better: Reapply sunscreen every two hours, even on cloudy days, and after swimming or sweating.

- Dress right: Protective clothing, such as a long-sleeved shirt, pants, a wide-brimmed hat offer better protection than does sunscreen.

- Seek shade: Remember that the sun's UV rays are strongest between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. Remember the shadow rule when in the sun: No shadow, seek shade.

- Beware of reflection: Water, snow and sand reflect damaging solar rays, which can increase your chance of sunburn.

- UV Index: The UV Index provides important information for planning outdoor activities in ways that prevent overexposure to the sun. Developed by the National Weather Service and the EPA, the UV Index is issued daily in selected cities across the United States.

Take your vitamins: Get vitamin D safely through a diet that includes vitamin supplements and foods fortified with vitamin D, such as milk.

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