

Caring for Your Eyes All Year Long

By David A. Schlessinger, M.D.

During the summer months, millions of people flocked to the beach and moved their recreational activities from the comfort of the indoors to the blazing heat of the outdoors. With increased attention on skin cancer, we were mindful of wearing sunscreen, however, we may have overlooked a part of our body that is extremely susceptible to sun damage: the eye.

According to the American Cancer Society, cancers of the skin are by far the most common types of cancer. About 5.4 million basal and squamous cell skin cancers are diagnosed each year, occurring in about 3.3 million Americans, as some people have more than one. About 8 out of 10 of these are basal cell cancers; squamous cell cancers occur less often.

The eyelid and eye itself are just as vulnerable to sun damage as the rest of the body. The eye is susceptible to a number of cancers from excessive sun exposure, including melanoma of the melanin-producing cells of the eye, and carcinoma, which occurs in the tissues of and around the eye, including the eyelid.



Besides skin cancer, other eye diseases that are directly related to sun exposure include:

Cataracts. Cataracts are a “clouding” of the lens in the eye that affects vision. Prolonged sun exposure, as well as smoking, alcohol use, and diabetes, are major risk factors for cataracts.

Pterygiums. These are a pinkish, triangular-shaped tissue growth on the cornea. Since pterygiums are most common in sunny climates, researchers theorize that UV exposure is a causative factor.

Photokeratitis. This is a painful inflammation of the cornea caused by light reflected by sand or water.

Macular degeneration. This is a disease that causes damage to the center of the retina, destroying sharp, central vision, which can lead to permanent vision loss.

Here’s the good news: There are a number of simple things you can do to minimize the impact of the sun on your baby blues, greens, or browns.

1. Wear sunscreen around your eyes. Standard sunscreens can’t be applied to the eyelid, but mineral-based powder sunscreens are safe. Look for a brand that’s a true mineral brand—one that contains 100 percent minerals and that meets FDA guidelines for being water-resistant. Other brands that only contain a small amount of minerals won’t work and will bleed into your eyes, potentially causing eye damage. Consistent application of sunscreen appropriate for the eye area will help prevent sun damage, which in turn reduces the signs of aging.

2. Cover up. Wearing a hat also protects your face and eyes from sun exposure. The best type of hat to wear is one with a 3-inch brim, as it will protect the neck, eyes, ears, and scalp. Though a baseball cap is not ideal, it does shield your face somewhat from the sun.

3. Choose the right sunglasses. It’s crucial to wear sunglasses to protect your eyes from harmful UV rays. Look for sunglasses that are labeled as blocking at least 95 percent of UVA and UVB radiation. While it may seem that darker shades are better, the color of the lenses in no way alters the level of defense; in fact, choosing gray-colored lenses reduces light intensity without altering the color of objects. The label on the glasses contains all the information you need to know. Glasses that wrap around your face offer the greatest level of protection, blocking the sun from every angle.

Sunglasses for sports: If you’re playing sports outdoors, make sure you choose sunglasses that have shatter-resistant frames and lenses. While street glasses may seem trendy, a sharp piece penetrating your eye can cause permanent damage, including blindness. For contact or impact sports such as basketball, baseball, tennis, or football, wear sports goggles with polycarbonate lenses (3mm thickness is recommended) and side shields that pass ASTM International guidelines.

Sunglasses for kids: Remember that children need their own real sunglasses, not cute toys. In fact, children are at greater risk for retinal damage caused by short wavelengths of light. Children’s sunglasses are available at most optical stores; take the time and care to find a pair for your child.



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Now that you’ve renewed your commitment to sun protection, how can you make up for all the sun worshipping you’ve already done? Here are some quick fixes to ameliorate or reverse sun damage and restore youthful appearance.

BOTOX® Cosmetic. Botox is commonly used to reduce or eliminate the appearance of facial wrinkles. It is injected under the skin into areas surrounding the eyes, forehead, and mouth to smooth crow’s-feet as well as frown and worry lines. Results can be seen within a few days and can last three to six months.

Laser skin resurfacing. Wrinkles around the eye respond very well to laser treatment. A microbeam of laser energy is used to remove the sun-damaged skin around the eyes. As the skin heals, new collagen is formed and lines are markedly diminished. Sunspots are also removed as new healthy skin is regenerated. Typically, the procedure is done in the office with local anesthesia, and the skin heals within days. Although redness may persist for a few weeks, it can be covered with makeup and will not impact normal activity.

Wrinkle fillers. Sun damage and age can lead to a loss of collagen and fat in the face and around the eyes. There are a variety of wrinkle fillers that fill in hollows and eliminate facial lines. Restylane and Juvéderm are fillers that are useful to get rid of fine lines. Deeper lines and folds can be treated with Radiesse or Perlane. Sculptra is unique as it acts as a catalyst for new collagen growth in all parts of the face. It is injected and can actually be manipulated to “sculpt the face” to give a more youthful appearance overall.

Intense pulsed light (IPL). IPL facial rejuvenation treats some common signs of sun damage, including brown spots, freckles, and uneven skin tone. Usually, four to six treatment sessions, lasting about 20 minutes each, will provide long-term results, with no downtime.

No matter how you protected yourself this past summer, remember that a few simple steps go a long way. Your eyes and skin are easily damaged, with long-term repercussions. Straightforward precautions and regular eye exams will keep your eyes bright and problem-free all year long.



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