Five tips for protecting your eyes from the sun

When it comes to protecting our skin from the sun, our options are as limitless as the rays beating down on us. Sunscreen comes in lotion, spray or stick form. It can have UVA and UVB filters. It’s waterproof, sweatproof, anti-aging, hypoallergenic and tear-free. SPF ranges from 5 to 100. It can be found in makeup, lip balm, moisturizers, you name it.

But sunscreen is not designed for your eyes. At least not yet. It’s still just as important to protect your eyes from the sun’s harmful rays as it is to shield your skin.

Ultraviolet rays can lead to numerous health problems ranging from eye cancer to pink eye. They can also cause cataracts, photokeratitis (a kind of sunburn of the cornea) and pterygium (a white or creamy fleshy growth on the surface of the eye).¹

Most of us realize that staring into the sun for long periods of time isn’t good for our long-term vision. But its rays actually reach our eyes in a variety of ways. Fresh snow, for instance, reflects as much as 80 percent of UV radiation, which means we can damage our eyes even by looking down ... even in the winter.² Sea foam reflects about 25 percent of UV radiation, dry sand about 15 percent. Even grass, soil and water reflect UV rays (less than 10 percent).³

Researchers estimate we receive 80 percent of our lifetime exposure to UV rays before age 18! Compared to their parents, children have larger pupils (allowing more light into their eyes) and clearer lenses plus are outside without eye protection more frequently and for longer periods than most adults.⁵

So what should you do to protect your eyes and your children’s eyes? Here are 5 tips:

**Know when the sun is strongest.** The highest ultraviolet radiation exposure for eyes and skin is actually in the morning and mid-afternoon, rather than at noon.⁶ Sun exposure to the eyes tends to be more continual in fall, winter and spring when the sun is lower in the sky.⁷

**Wear the right lenses.** Choose sunglasses that limit transmission to no more than 1 percent UVB and 1 percent UVA rays.⁸ Sometimes the information on the glasses indicates 99 percent of the UV rays are blocked.⁹ That’s okay.
Darker lenses can be helpful, particularly if you're more light sensitive. Gray lenses provide the least color distortion but do not offer any better protection than other colored lenses.

**Wear the right frames.** While most sunglasses can help block UV rays from entering through the lenses, most frame styles do not prevent rays from reaching the sides, top and bottom of the glasses.

**Double up.** Hats with brims offer no protection from UV rays reflected up from surfaces such as pavement, sand, water, etc. A combination of shades and a hat is best.

**Wear the right contacts.** UV-blocking contact lenses can also provide an important measure of additional protection. The level of protection can vary. Contact lenses that protect against UV rays are classified into two categories: Class 1 and Class 2. Class 1 UV-blockers provide the greatest measure of UV protection.

So the next time you’re applying sunscreen, make sure you’re following these guidelines as well. Your sight might just depend on it.

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1. http://www.preventblindness.org/how-can-uv-rays-damage-your-eyes
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