

PROLONGED EXPOSURE TO THE SUN CAN MAKE TIME OUTDOORS A DANGEROUS ACTIVITY

Lack of Proper Eye Protection Means Greater Risk of Vision Loss

CHICAGO - When the warmer spring weather arrives, most Americans dive into their wardrobes to break out their t-shirts, shorts and sandals. But some may not realize that what they are not wearing can actually affect their health. While most people know that sunscreen is essential when venturing outdoors to protect their skin from ultraviolet rays, it is crucial to remember that the eyes can be damaged as well. In fact, prolonged exposure to UV rays can result in serious eye damage.

Cataracts, the leading cause of blindness in the world, can be caused by UV-A and UV-B rays. According to the "Vision Problems in the U.S." report by Prevent Blindness America, there are over 20 million people in America alone that suffer from the disease.

UV-A penetrates deep into the eye and may injure the macula, the part of the retina responsible for sight in the center of the field of vision. UV-B is mainly absorbed by the cornea and lens of the eye and can damage these tissues. Photokeratitis, or "corneal sunburn," is a result of intense exposure to UV-B. The condition is extremely painful and sufferers can experience vision loss for 1-2 days. Pterygium, a tissue growth that forms on the white of the eye and is also caused by UV exposure, may spread to the cornea without treatment and may eventually require surgery.

"UV rays are harmful to everyone," said Daniel Garrett, senior vice president of Prevent Blindness America. "Adults, children, men, women, no matter what your background, you are susceptible to eye damage from the sun if you don't take the necessary precautions."

Fortunately, effective eye protection is as simple as two easy steps. Wearing both a wide-brimmed hat or cap and the proper UV-rated sunglasses are all it takes to ward off the damaging effects. Sunglasses should block out 99-100 percent of both UV-A and UV-B radiation, and don't have to be expensive to be effective. Consumers need to remember when purchasing sunglasses that just because the lenses may be tinted, it does not guarantee that they will block out UV radiation. Wraparound sunglasses are ideal.

Parents need to make sure their children wear UV eye protection as well. Choosing unbreakable, well-fitted sunglasses and a hat that shades the face is the best defense. Since sun damage can be cumulative, it is imperative that parents take precautions now to avoid vision loss in the future.