

May is Ultraviolet Awareness Month

5/3/2011

Exposure to ultraviolet (UV) rays can burn delicate eye tissue and raise the risk of developing cataracts and cancers of the eye. Protecting your eyes from UV dangers should be a priority with summer fast approaching.

Most people know the harmful effects that UV rays can have on the skin, but many are not aware of the damage that they can cause to the eyes. Possibly the most frightening aspect of UV damage is that it is cumulative, meaning the negative effects may not present themselves until years later.

In fact, a recent survey sponsored by Transitions Optical Inc., revealed that although 82% of respondents knew that extended exposure to the sun could cause skin cancer, only 9% knew it could damage vision. Additionally, only one in six respondents said they wear sunglasses when they prepare for extended exposure to the sun and only approximately one third said they wear a hat.

Extended UV exposure has been linked to eye damage including:

Cataract: a major cause of visual impairment and blindness worldwide. Cataracts are a cloudiness of the lens inside the eye that develops over a period of many years. Laboratory studies have implicated UV radiation as a cause of cataract. Furthermore, studies have shown that certain types of cataract are associated with a history of higher ocular exposure to UV and especially UV-B radiation.

Age-Related Macular Degeneration (AMD): a leading cause of vision loss in the US for people age 55 and older. Exposure to UV and intense violet/blue visible radiation is damaging to retinal tissue and scientists have speculated that chronic UV or intense violet/blue light exposure may contribute to degenerative processes in the retina.

Pterygium: a growth of tissue on the white of the eye that may extend onto the clear cornea where it can block vision. It can be removed surgically, but often recurs, and can cause cosmetic concerns and vision loss if untreated.

Photokeratitis: essentially, a reversible sunburn of the cornea resulting from excessive UV-B exposure. It can be extremely painful for 1-2 days and can result in temporary loss of vision. There is some indication that long-term exposure to UV-B can result in corneal and conjunctival degenerative changes.

Fortunately, eye protection doesn't have to be expensive to be effective. Quality sunglasses should block out 99-100% of both UV-A and UV-B radiation and prices vary. For UV protection in everyday eyewear, there are several options like UV-blocking lens materials, coating and photochromic lenses.