

Ultraviolet Light and the Eyes

Most people are aware of the dangers posed by ultraviolet light (UV). They range from sunburns to more ominous long-term changes such as skin cancers.

This has helped people to become more aware of sun exposure and taking steps to minimize it by covering up with hats or clothing and using sunscreens. However, people are often less aware of the dangers specific to their eyes.

The skin around the eyes is particularly susceptible given its very thin, fine nature. It will tend to show aging changes with wrinkles creating the crow's feet appearance and is also prone to cancers, most commonly basal cell, but also squamous cell and melanoma.

The skin will also lose its elasticity and contribute to drooping of the lids and form bags around the eyes.

Additionally, the eye itself can undergo many changes from UV exposure. The filmy covering over the white part of the eye can degenerate and form pterygia, which are fleshy growths that usually extend onto the cornea towards the pupil and covering the iris.

When severe they must be removed surgically. Squamous cell cancers can also arise in this area. UV exposure also speeds up cataract formation, requiring cataract surgery at a younger age. Furthermore, UV light is believed to play a role in the development of macular degeneration.

Macular degeneration is a disease that robs people of their central vision. The macula is the central region of the retina at the back of the eye and acts like the film in a camera, detecting the light and then transmitting the image back to the brain. The dark layers underneath the retina tend to wear out and eventually the retina fails resulting in vision loss. A quality pair of sunglasses that block UVA and UVB light will greatly decrease the chance of developing any of the above complications.

People should avoid "cheap" sunglasses that are only darkened lenses since they offer a false sense of security and could actually increase the risk of developing damaging conditions in the eye. The darkened lens in these glasses allows the pupil to dilate and then even more dangerous UV light can enter into the eye itself. Therefore, with the arrival of summer, remember to cover up, use sunscreen and take care of your eyes!

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