

Most Americans know the importance of UV blocking sunscreen to protect their skin from aging and diseases. Unfortunately, only 32 percent of Americans understand the same is true when it comes to protecting their eyes from aging and diseases.

“Summer can be a dangerous time for the eyes because people spend so much time outdoors, exposed to the sun,” said Sue Lowe, O.D., an AOA UV protection expert. “Overexposure to ultraviolet rays fast forwards aging of the eyes and increases the risk for serious diseases.”

If the eyes are exposed to excessive amounts of UV radiation over a short period of time, a “sunburn” called photokeratitis can occur. This condition may be painful and include symptoms such as red eyes, a foreign body sensation or gritty feeling in the eyes, extreme sensitivity to light and excessive tearing. Photokeratitis is usually temporary and rarely causes permanent damage. Ongoing exposure to UV radiation, however, can cause serious harm to the eyes and age them prematurely.

Research has shown that exposure to small amounts of UV radiation over a period of many years increases the chance of developing cataracts, macular degeneration—the leading cause of blindness in adults—and eye cancer. Long-term exposure may also cause damage to the retina, a nerve-rich lining of the eye that is used for seeing.

“In addition to sunglasses, certain contact lenses incorporate an ultraviolet blocker in the lens, which helps further reduce exposure to UV light that can eventually cause cataracts and other eye problems,” said Dr. Lowe. “In addition to wearing sunglasses or protective contact lenses, applying UV-blocking sunscreen around the eye area and wearing a hat will further protect the eyes and help prevent premature aging.”

To provide adequate protection for the eyes, the AOA and the Nebraska Optometric Association (NOA) recommend sunglasses and protective contact lenses should:

- Block out 99 to 100 percent of both UV-A and UV-B radiation
- Screen out 75 to 90 percent of visible light
- Sunglasses should be perfectly matched in color and free of distortion and imperfection and have lenses that are gray for proper color recognition.

The AOA and NOA also urge parents to remember to protect infants’ and children’s eyes from the sun at all times. This is particularly important as kids tend to spend more time in the sun than adults.

A good way to monitor eye health, maintain good vision, and keep up-to-date on the latest in UV protection is by scheduling yearly comprehensive eye exams with an eye doctor.