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Today, many Americans are well aware of the risks of sunburn and skin cancer from the sun's ultraviolet radiation, a form of energy that is strong enough to affect the chemical structure of body tissue – down to the molecular level. Many organizations can be thanked for this. For instance, the US Environmental Protection Agency (also known as EPA) has set out "to promote sun-safe behaviors and reduce exposure to harmful UV radiation." This same governmental agency developed the UV Index Scale, a tool that is designed to help individuals avoid harmful radiation. However, Americans are less informed about the potential eye health risks of extended exposure to the sun's UV rays.

Extended exposure to the sun's UV rays has been linked to eye damage, including cataracts (a clouding of the lens in the eye that affects vision), macular degeneration (a disease that gradually destroys sharp, central vision), and pignoculae-ptyrygia (two common types of eye growths) among other ailments that can cause temporary and even permanent vision loss. Since UV damage is cumulative, it is important for individuals to take action to protect their eyes as soon as possible. Taking action is even more important in the case of kids since they spend significantly more time outdoors than the average adult. But, what are some practical ways to protect you and your family's eyesight from the potential dangers of the sun's UV rays?

Besides wearing a wide-brimmed hat, another effective way you can protect your eyesight and the eyesight of your loved ones is through encouraging the use of UV protective sunwear. It is important to use protective eyewear any time your eyes are exposed to UV light, whether it is summer or winter and even under the shade. Why is this? UV light is reflected by surfaces, including buildings, windows and even snow. In fact, snow is known to "reflect 80 percent of UV rays, doubling your overall exposure" to UV radiation from the sun. "And what if I wear UV contact lenses?" you may ask. Although wearing UV contact lenses will help protect your eyesight, please remember to wear additional protective eyewear since UV-blocking contacts "shield only the part of your eye under the lenses and [the UV rays] still can damage... tissues not covered by the lens."

Although wearing UV protective eyewear is better than not wearing any at all, it is important that you choose quality sunglasses for you and your family. Your sunglasses should block 100% of UVA and UVB rays and absorb most of the sun's HEV rays (high-energy visible rays). Also, wearing sunglasses with large lenses or a close-fitting wraparound style will help protect as much of the delicate skin around your eyes as possible. Also, while the color of the sunglasses doesn't affect UV protect, remember that color does effect HEV protection. Good news is that your eye doctor will help you choose the best lenses that will block HEV rays.

The sun's harmful UV rays can tremendously affect your eyesight and that of your family. You can help prevent cataracts – the number one worldwide cause of permanent vision loss. The good news is that there is a lot we can do to protect our eyesight. One such way is to use quality UV protective eyewear. And at the same time, the bonus is that you can look –œcool–• as you add a touch of style to any outfit.

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