

Much to their painful surprise, people learn every year that it is possible to burn the cornea of their eyes from too much ultraviolet light.

Dr. Janet Cushing, an optometrist with UW Health, says that while the condition (known as photokeratitis) most typically occurs in the winter from bright sunlight reflecting off snowfields, it can also occur in summer conditions.

“We see boaters and fishermen with photokeratitis, caused when the bright sunlight reflects off the water,” she says. “It hurts like crazy and so people are miserable when it happens.”

The sun’s ultraviolet B (UVB) rays can burn the cornea—the clear surface of the eye. Symptoms include intense pain, redness, swollen eyelids, a headache, and a feeling that grit is in the eye. Photokeratitis can cause hazy vision or even the loss of vision.

Sufferers are generally treated with an eye patch (to keep the eyes closed) or a bandage contact lens and antibiotic drops. The cornea usually heals within a day or two, but the condition is painful while it lasts.

Another eye condition caused by too much sunlight is pinguecula, a growth on the eyeball that can look like a pink patch or an elevated yellow bump on the white of the eye. Though harmless, they can be unsightly or become inflamed and irritated. Cushing said that macular degeneration may also be linked to sun exposure, and UV light contributes to cataract formation.

The best treatment for any of these conditions is prevention.

“Wearing sunglasses that block UV light is the best way to protect eyes when on the water or in other bright conditions,” she said.

Prevention is also the key word for other summer eye threats.

“Eye protection prevents about 90 percent of eye injuries,” Cushing says. That goes for projectile injuries caused by summer fun, such as baseball, air gun pellets, and paint balls, as well as the injuries that can be caused by summer yard work and tools such as weed trimmers and other power tools.

If you do have a foreign object in your eye, the only safe way to try to remove it on your own is by flushing it with water, Cushing says. And if it is penetrating the eyeball, don't even try to remove it.

“Never attempt to remove a penetrating object because you can cause more damage,” she says. “Tape a paper cup over the eye to protect it, and get to an emergency room immediately.”

Finally, mother wasn't kidding when she warned us to be careful around fireworks. Prevent Blindness America reports that eye injuries tend to peak right around the Fourth of July.

In 2007, 6,300 Americans were treated in hospital emergency rooms for fireworks injuries. About 1,400 of them suffered injuries to the eye.

“Children under age 15 account for 40 percent of fireworks injuries,” Cushing says. “And sparklers accounted for the most injuries that required medical attention to children ages four and under.”

So while warm weather brings summer festivities, it also should come with a warning: Protect the eyes from too much sun and fun.