

Outdoors health tips from the posse

Take care of your eyes

BY MARK RACKAY

When I was a kid, I dreamed of being a professional hunter, or PH, in Africa.

I imagined I would guide hunters for all the dangerous game, including elephant, buffalo, lion, leopard and rhino. That dream became as dead as easy credit about the time I hit the third grade.

My grades were suffering and I complained I could not see the blackboard. My father suggested I sit closer but I was already sitting in the front row. Off to the eye doctor I went, kicking and screaming, where I was fitted with glasses.

Nobody would have any faith in a PH who had to wear eyeglasses as thick as Coke bottle bottoms, so I pursued other ventures. Fifty years later, I am still wearing glasses and have yet to be a PH.

For folks who spend lots of time outdoors, special care should be taken to protect your eyes. Ultra violet rays, like the sun produces, have very bad effects on your eyes.

UV radiation from the sun can trigger the onset of cataracts. It is a common misconception that cataracts are age-related. Cataracts can and do occur at just about any age, and the sun can make them appear sooner.

Sunlight that is reflected from the surface of water or snow can cause conjunctivitis and keratitis. Symptoms of conjunctivitis, sometimes called "pink eye" include intense itching, a gritty feeling in the eye, redness, a watery discharge and a runny nose.

Keratitis is a generic term to describe a variety of corneal infections, irritations and inflammations of the eye. It is important to obtain medical attention immediately because delay can cause scarring which would cause vision problems for the rest of your life.

Fortunately, simply wearing sunglasses and a wide brimmed hat while outdoors can avert most eye problems. I have always been a fan of polarized glasses. Avoid getting glasses based solely on appearance.



Strive for the better quality lens and polarization.

Sunlight that reflects off a surface creates a dangerous intensity of reflected light that can cause a glare and reduce visibility. Lenses that are polarized contain a special filter that blocks this type of reflected light, thereby reducing the glare.

Lens color is something that is up for debate. Brown color lenses were always my favorite over shallow waters, where you can see the bottom, such as ocean flats and streambeds. Gray lenses work well in deeper waters or for bright blue skies. Speak with your eye doctor about the best color lens for your personal type of outdoor activity.

It seems odd to talk about this here, during the hot month of August, but another eye problem an outdoor person might encounter is snow blindness.

Snow blindness, also called photokeratitis, is a very painful condition that is caused by too much exposure to the UV rays produced by the sun. The sun's ultraviolet rays actually burn the cornea of the eye. The symptoms may not appear for several hours. Snow blindness affects those people who venture outside in the snow-covered terrain. Like

many other things, it is worse in the higher altitudes. Hikers, snowmobilers, skiers, hunters and just about anyone who spends time outdoors, are all at risk. Fortunately, it is usually a temporary condition, but it must be treated.

The symptoms include an increased tearing, sometimes profusely. The eyes may appear bloodshot and sometimes the eyelids will twitch uncontrollably. There can be moderate eye pain with a very gritty feeling, such as sand in the eyes. In some cases, the eyes may swell shut. Very extreme cases, or repeated exposures, may cause permanent eye damage or blindness. The pain you feel is a result of the cornea's inflammation that occurred when it was exposed to the sun's UV rays.

You will want to seek medical attention as soon as possible if you suspect you are experiencing snow blindness. Until you reach medical assistance, it is important to try and minimize the damage to the eyes. First is to get out of the sun as soon as possible. Put on sunglasses to help reduce further exposure. A cold compress on the eyes may help reduce the pain. Avoid rubbing the eyes, as this will only aggravate the condition.

Wear your sunglasses all year round, even on a cloudy day. The sun's UV rays pass through the clouds. In the wintertime it is especially important, as the snow reflects the rays back into your eyes.

Contact lens wearers should be aware that most brands of contacts do not provide any UV protection. There are some that have this ability but it is limited to the Cornea and Pupil of the eyes. This leaves the sensitive tissues of the conjunctiva and eyelids exposed. Therefore, good sunglasses are still required.

When I got my glasses back in the third grade, I was once again able to see the blackboard. I even passed, and was promoted to the fourth grade. The teacher referred to my passing as a "photo finish." I never did become a PH but have spent most of my life outdoors. If you see a guy running up the trail in coke bottle bottom glasses, tell him hey. It's probably me.

Mark Rackay is a freelance writer who serves as a director and spokesman for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org

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