

Health + Prevention Apr 16, 2018

First aid for eye sunburn

How to identify sunburned eyes and what to do about it

Did you know that your eyes can get sunburned? Informally, people often call it “snow blindness” – an unpleasant eye injury caused by strong UV rays. BETTER VISION explains: How can you tell if you’ve got eye sunburn? How can sunburn and UV light damage your eyes – and what should you do in an emergency?

Expert advice provided by: Dr. Albert J. Augustin, Director of Karlsruhe Ophthalmology Clinic

Whether you’re at the beach or on the slopes, when the sun is shining most people are in a good mood. Sadly, there are a few things that could put a damper on your fun in the sun. One of them is eye sunburn. A rule of thumb is to act fast because eye sunburn can have direct consequences for your vision. But what’s the best way to treat eye sunburn?



How to identify eye sunburn

As there are so many things that irritate our eyes, you first have to be able to identify eye sunburn. Eye sunburn might affect one or both eyes. Typical symptoms of eye sunburn, commonly known as “snow blindness,” (keratitis solaris or keratitis photoelectrica) are: sore/teary/itchy/red eyes where even your vision seems blurred, and an increased sensitivity to light.

In serious cases of eye sunburn, the outer corneal layer is destroyed, which exposes the nerve endings beneath it. Sufferers often complain of the feeling of having a foreign body in their eye, as if sand has got into it. Blinking is uncomfortable, and sometimes very painful. But eye sunburn is normally harmless. Then again, if you experience it repeatedly, it can even lead to cancer, [> macular degeneration](#) or [> chronically dry eyes](#). The term “snow blindness” is used to describe eye sunburn because it often affects people who go hiking in the mountains as snow reflects up to 88 percent of UV rays, which make them all the more powerful. It’s a similar story when you’re lying on the beach: water reflects 10–20 percent of UV rays.¹ Bear in mind that the higher you climb, the stronger the UV radiation will be. For every 300 feet you climb, UV radiation gets up to 12 percent more intense.² It’s up to 16 times higher on snowy terrain. That’s why sunbathers aren’t the only ones who should protect their eyes – anyone who enjoys skiing, hiking in the mountains or performs welding work is exposed to harmful UV rays.



First aid for eye sunburn

Just like regular sunburn, the symptoms of eye sunburn often only become noticeable later on: people generally start to experience them 3–12 hours later. As soon as you suspect you may have eye sunburn, it’s important to act fast so you can relieve unpleasant symptoms and prevent further damage.

1. Get your eyes checked out

While eye sunburn can be very painful, more often than not it clears up in a few days because the top layers of the cornea have the ability to repair themselves. The eye is a very sensitive organ, so you should always get yours checked out by an eye doctor to determine your symptoms – in extreme cases, you may even go blind. Your doctor can prescribe pain-relief medication and treat the eye with disinfectant or antibiotic drops and gels to ward off an infection. A vitamin A gel might also help regenerate the damaged tissue.

2. Stay indoors and cool off

To prevent permanent damage to the cornea, sufferers should immediately avoid exposure to direct

sunlight and quickly cool the eyes, e.g. using a cloth dampened in cold water or, if they can, a gel-filled mask or glasses. These can be purchased at a pharmacy or beauty and health retailer and provide fast pain relief.

3. No rubbing or scratching!

Even if your eyes are itchy, avoid rubbing them as this can make them redder.

4. Ditch your contact lenses for a pair of glasses

Contact lenses should be removed immediately to prevent any further irritation. It's advisable to stay in a darkened room until your symptoms subside.



> [NOW: Full UV protection in all clear ZEISS lenses](#)

> [Explore more about the first spectacle lenses made for refreshing after contact lens time](#)

5. OTC medications can provide quick relief

If the pain worsens and you can't see a doctor quickly, ibuprofen and acetaminophen can help.

6. Prevention is better than cure

Prevention is the best kind of treatment – avoid suffering at all costs! A good pair of sunglasses, ski goggles or protective eyewear at work – all of which feature a UV filter up to 400 nm³ – can protect the eyes against harmful UV rays. A good pair of sunglasses to protect against eye sunburn should have at least protection class 3, and if you're in the snow you need protection class 4. The protection class is normally indicated on one of the temples. Always ensure that your sunglasses can filter UV light that comes in from the top or the sides. Read on to find out more about when you need to protect your eyes against UV light. There are clear lenses that can also offer you full UV protection.

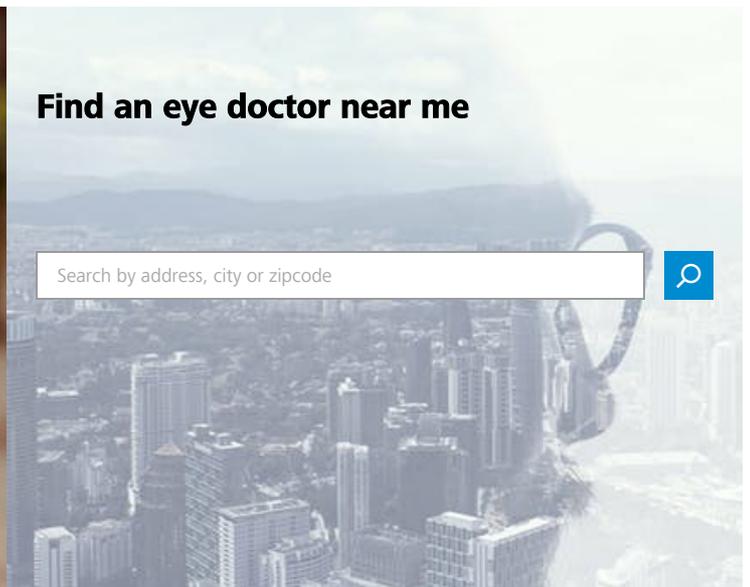
My Vision Profile

Determine your personal visual habits now and find your individualized lens solution.

[Check your Vision Profile now!](#)



Find an eye doctor near me





Related Articles



What sunglasses are right for your favorite activity?

There's a perfect pair of sunglasses for any occasion.

Health + Prevention Jul 27, 2018
Tags: Sunglasses



UV protection in daily life

Windowpanes, clothing and glasses – What blocks UV light? What doesn't?

Health + Prevention Jul 27, 2018
Tags: Sunglasses



UV protection and glare protection

What's the difference?

Health + Prevention Jul 6, 2018
Tags: Sunglasses



How sunglasses are made

What steps are included in the making of sunglasses? Learn what kind of materials are used to make sunglasses and how designers bring life to their ideas.

Lifestyle + Fashion Jul 3, 2018
Tags: Sunglasses

Related Products



Self-tinting lenses

One pair of glasses for all occasions.

[Learn more](#)



Colored Lenses

Sunglass lenses: which tint is right for you?

[Learn more](#)



Sunglass lenses

One lens for all outdoor activities.

[Learn more](#)

¹ Sliney DH. Physical factors in cataractogenesis: ambient ultraviolet radiation and temperature. Invest Ophthalmol Vis Sci. 1986 May;27(5):781-90.

² http://www.who.int/uv/uv_and_health/en/

³ A range of healthcare bodies and studies have come to the conclusion that complete UV protection can only be guaranteed with a filter up to 400 nm. They include: the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection (ICNIRP); Health Physics. (2004): 87(2) 171-186, American Conference of Governmental and Industrial Hygienists (ACGIH), ISO 21348 (definitions of Solar Irradiance Spectral Categories), Australian Sunlens Standard AS/NZS 1067:2003



Explore

Understanding Vision
Health + Prevention
Lifestyle + Fashion
Driving + Mobility
Sports + Leisure
Work Life

Help me choose

Progressive Lenses
Sunglasses
Working Glasses
Sports Glasses
Glasses for Children
Lens Coatings
Lens Cleaning
At the Eye Care Professional

Services

My Vision Profile
Online Vision Check

For Eye Care Professionals

Keep Eyes Wide Open When Choosing Your Business Partner
Instruments + Technologies
ZEISS Eyeglass Lenses
ZEISS Cleaning Solutions