

Outdoor Workers' Eyes and UV Exposure

There are nearly 800,000 work-related eye injuries each year (CDC). Every day, approximately 2,000 U.S. workers receive medical treatment for eye injuries related to or sustained at work. 26% of eye injuries are due to exposure to harmful environments. One of these is extreme winter weather.

Sunglasses are a critical health necessity. A significant number of Americans are not aware of the health risk they take when going outside without protecting their eyes against ultraviolet (UV) radiation. One in four adults rarely or never wears sunglasses outside.

Whether it's sunny or cloudy, spring or winter, UV rays can damage eyes in profound ways. Short-term UV exposure can leave eyes bloodshot, swollen or hyper-sensitive to light. This exposure can accelerate serious eye health problems, including cataracts, macular degeneration, abnormal growths on the eyes, and cancer of the eye and surrounding skin. UV damage is cumulative, meaning that damage done to the eyes adds up over time, and once the damage has been done, it can't be reversed. It's never too late to start protecting your eyes. In winter, UV rays can reflect off of snow and into the eyes. After a snowfall, individuals can experience photokeratitis, also known as "snow blindness."

Three Ways to Keep Workers' Eyes Safe This Winter

1. Keep eyes moist – A main problem with winter weather is dryness in the air caused by heating or frigidly cold air. Outdoor workers shouldn't sit directly next to heat sources so the dry air impacts eyes as little as possible. The use of heaters or blowers creates dryness in the air and workers may need to take extra steps to keep eyes moist and healthy. Humidifiers can be used to put moisture back in the air or eye drops can moisturize dry eyes.

2. Wear sunglasses – UV rays are almost twice as strong in the winter because snowy conditions can intensify and reflect the rays from the sun. Wearing sunglasses outside during winter can help minimize the effect of UV rays by blocking almost 99% of UV light and by providing a barrier to the chilling winter winds. Aside from protecting workers' eyes from the reflection from the snow, it's important to know that high elevation plays an important role in eye safety during winter. The air is much thinner, which means more UV rays are able to reach down through the atmosphere.

3. Opt for eyeglasses, not contacts – Because of their direct contact with the eyes, contacts can significantly contribute to already dry, winter eyes. They act as sponges and require extra amounts of moisture in order to function properly and stay comfortable. Once they begin to dry out, contacts can cling to the eye, making them uncomfortable, cloudy and difficult to remove. Eyeglasses reduce the contact with one's eyes, making it simpler to keep eyes moistened.



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