

Vanderbilt Doctors Warn to Protect Your Eyes from the Sun's Damaging Rays

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(PhysOrg.com) -- When it comes to damaging sun rays, skin protection is a top priority for many. But there is another area that needs to be brought into focus -- the eyes.

Excessive exposure to ultraviolet (UV) light reflected off sand, water or pavement can damage the eyes, said Vanderbilt Eye Institute's Mark Melson, M.D., oculoplastic and reconstructive surgeon.

Melson is an ophthalmologist who performs plastic surgery around the eyes.

"I treat many patients with skin cancers that are presumably related to [UV exposure](#)," said Melson. "Many of my patients have eyelid tumors from excessive exposure to UV light. The most frequent conditions we see are actual skin cancers, bumps, lumps and nodules that grow on the skin around the eyes. Typically the lower eyelid sees the most damage."

In addition to lesions and tumors that may be cosmetically unappealing and require surgical removal, [sun exposure](#) may also lead to the development of cataracts and macular degeneration. Other eye problems caused by extended UV exposure include corneal sunburns or photokeratitis and a condition called pingueculae, which are tiny yellow bumps on the eye that begin on the white part of the eye and may eventually progress to pterygium, a condition which can disrupt vision.

Melson, who performs roughly 10 eyelid repairs a month, said most of

the conditions are results of cumulative effects of sun exposure and most patients will experience other skin changes prior to the development of a life-changing condition that impacts the eye.

Melson cautions that damage to the eyes from UV light is not just limited to the outdoors.

Tanning bed enthusiasts must also be cognizant of the potential impact the rays can have.

Melson and his colleagues at the Mohs Micrographic Surgery Unit in the Dermatology Clinic at Vanderbilt Health One Hundred Oaks work in concert to treat patients in a same day procedure, which makes the Vanderbilt program relatively unique.

Traditionally the removal of the cancer and reconstruction of the area around the eye are done in separate locations, with the repair taking place in the operating room under general anesthesia or procedural sedation. But Vanderbilt has recently begun offering a one-stop-shop option that appeals to both surgeons and patients.

“This is a process that saves the patient time and money,” said Melson. “We are getting really good results. We are hoping we can highlight our program and use it as a model for other centers.”

Although UV rays are typically associated with direct sun exposure, the rays can be reflected from the ground, water, snow, sand and other bright surfaces. Melson says proper protection is the best defense against the harmful rays.

“We’ve all heard the same advice - covering exposed skin, using a high SPF sunscreen and reapplying it frequently,” said Melson. “But people also need to wear sunglasses and hats that will protect the eyes and the

skin around them.”

Most of Melson’s patients are age 50 or older, but he has treated patients as young as 20. With that in mind, Melson suggests parents protect their children.

“Everyone needs protective eyewear and hats,” said Melson. “Even babies need to have sunglasses with UV protection. Not all sunglasses have the ultraviolet coating, but most do. When purchasing sunglasses look for those that filter both UVA (ultraviolet A) and UVB (ultraviolet B).”

Provided by Vanderbilt Medical Center

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