From artificial tears to anti-glare screens—five tips for workplace eye wellness

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Dr. Lisa Gamell. Credit: University of South Florida

Whether you work in an office, staring at a computer screen for eight hours a day, or on a construction site, amid flying sparks and sawdust, it's important to protect your eyes from occupational hazards.

But are you?

The American Academy of Ophthalmology recognizes Workplace Eye Wellness Month in March as an annual reminder to promote eye wellness while on the job.

Here, Lisa Gamell, MD, a board-certified ophthalmologist and associate professor at USF Health's Morsani College of Medicine, shares her top five tips for workplace eye wellness.

If you work outdoors, wear shades

UV rays can cause photokeratitis, or for the layman, "sunburn of the eye," a temporary but uncomfortable condition that causes redness, sensitivity to light and tearing. With excessive exposure to the sun, eyes are more susceptible to cataracts and macular degeneration.

Those who work outdoors or near water are especially at risk for photokeratitis, but prevention is as easy as popping on a pair of shades.

"This is especially important now that the days are getting longer and we will be spending more time outdoors," Dr. Gamell said. "Polarized sunglasses will offer the most protection."

While commuters are not as at risk for photokeratitis, sunglasses will help make the daily commute more comfortable and safer by minimizing glare and enhancing contrast on the road.

Cut the glare

Those who spend numerous hours a day working at a computer are at risk of Computer Vision Syndrome. The effects aren't permanent, but they're definitely unpleasant, and include eye strain, redness and irritation or dryness.

Dr. Gamell said there are numerous steps computer users can take to reduce computer-related eye strain, including:

- Using an anti-glare screen or LCD monitor
- Adjusting the monitor so that it is not necessary to sit too close to the screen
- Ensuring the workspace is adequately lit
- Taking frequent breaks, looking away for about 30 seconds every 30 minutes
- Adjusting the font size, screen brightness, background color and resolution.

Uncorrected near-vision issues, such as presbyopia, which is a loss of elasticity in the lens of the eye, will also contribute to computer-related eye strain. An ophthalmologist can prescribe glasses to help computer users see at near and intermediate distances for optimal computer work.

Make sure you blink

Each time we blink, our eyelids coat our eyes in a lubricant that both moisturizes and cleanses.

Research shows that computer users blink less frequently than those reading from printouts and books. Not only that, computer users tend to have more incomplete blinks, in which the upper eyelid doesn't touch the lower eyelid, meaning there is a portion of the eye that doesn't receive the lubricating film, causing irritating dryness.

It's an easy enough fix, however.

"Using artificial tears throughout the day will help keep your eye lubricated," Dr. Gamell said.

Goggles, goggles, goggles

In her practice, Dr. Gamell sees far too many people who've suffered severe eye injuries that could have been avoided if the patient had simply chosen to wear a pair of protective goggles. Those who work with chemicals, UV light, or heavy cutting machinery, such as auto mechanics, carpenters, electricians, factory workers, janitors, lab technicians, plumbers and welders, are especially at risk.

Protective eyewear is usually made of special, durable plastic such a polycarbonate. Workers should ask their employer and their ophthalmologist about best steps for eye protection.

In many instances, people take an "it won't happen to me" kind of attitude about their eyes—and that's a mistake.

"Even if you're doing something like mowing the lawn, it's important to cover your eyes with protective eyewear," Dr. Gamell said. "Debris can fly into your eyes. Tree limbs can poke or scrape the eye. These kinds of injuries can be devastating."

When performing any type of work that involves debris, dust, machinery, chemicals, or anything that could potentially injure your eyes, abide by that old saying, "better safe than sorry," and protect your eyes.

Get your eyes checked

How current is your eyeglasses or contacts prescription? If it's older than a year, it's time for a checkup. While you'll usually be able to tell if your prescription isn't strong enough, it's a good idea to have your eyes examined annually, so that even slight changes in your vision can be

addressed sooner rather than later.

Provided by University of South Florida