



SUN SAFETY year round

Local eye professionals stress importance of eye protection, annual exams

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Many Gulf Coast residents are blind to the fact that the sun can cause serious vision problems, even during the area's balmy winter months. However, local physicians and eye care specialists say taking precautions that include scheduling an annual eye exam and practicing sun safety by wearing protective eyewear is important all year long.

In addition to stressing the importance of undergoing preventative eye exams, one of their main priorities is to get their patients to protect their eyes from the sun and other harmful elements.

A recent survey found that while 79

percent of Americans know that the sun causes skin cancer, only six percent know it can harm the eyes. It's just one misconception local eyecare professionals are hoping to correct.

"Everyone who lives on the Coast thinks about wearing sunscreen, but shading their eyes from the sun is equally important," says Kim Benigno, an optometrist at Eye Associates of the South. "While it's especially important to wear protective eyewear in the summer, we remind patients of the significance of protecting their eyes from sun and glare even during the winter months."

The effects of ultraviolet rays, which have the greatest potential to cause damage to the skin and the eyes, is often overlooked — especially during the winter, when sunglasses are mistakenly stored away with swimsuits and beach hats. But regardless of the temperature outside, the harmful effects of the sun remain powerful throughout the year, Benigno says.

"Ignoring the effects of UV now can lead to trouble later, in the form of eye disease or vision problems," Benigno says. "For example, one of the most common UV-related eye conditions is cataracts. Although curable with modern eye sur-

gery, if left untreated, cataracts can lead to blindness."

According to the American Academy of Ophthalmology, nearly 20.5 million Americans age 40 and older have cataracts. By the age of 80, half of all Americans suffer from cataracts. Research has shown that UV radiation increases the likelihood of certain cataracts.

The AAO also states that UV damage to the eye contributes to other eye diseases as well. One being age-related Macular Degeneration, which is the greatest cause of loss of vision in people over 50, affects more than 10 million Americans. Another, melanoma is the deadliest form of skin cancer. It can develop in the eyelids and around the delicate eye area.

But it's not all bad news. Benigno says wearing sunglasses with 100 percent UV protection; polarized lenses that change from clear to dark or regular lenses and contacts with UV protection can greatly minimize potential sun damage.

"So many serious vision problems could be avoided if everyone wore proper eye or sunglasses and shaded their eyes appropriately," she says. "It's one of the easiest things we can do for our health."

While the sale of sunglasses peaks during the summer months, sales of glasses with 100 percent UV protection are steady all year long, says Michelle Marek, optician at Kern Optical in Gulfport.

"Most of our customers today are educated on the importance of buying sunglasses with the highest amount of UV protection or with polarized lenses," Marek says. "Many of them fish year round or are near the water, while others simply realize the need for the best protection possible. While they know we carry them, they aren't simply looking for designer frames; they look for the type of lenses that will protect their eyes from the sun."

Regular comprehensive eye exams are also crucial to ensuring healthy

vision now and throughout your lifetime, says Rainna Bahadur, M.D., a board-certified ophthalmologist at Eye Associates of the South. Bahadur says undergoing an annual exam is one of the best ways to detect potentially-dangerous medical conditions.

"There are so many health problems that can only be detected through a thorough eye exam, making it a priority for everyone over the age of 40," Bahadur says. "Besides being the only way to diagnose glaucoma and other eye diseases, an eye exam often leads to the discovery of high blood pressure, diabetes and other life-threatening diseases."

While some medical organizations say 50 is the age at which to begin having regular exams, Bahadur advises her patients that 40 is not too early. That's when many begin to experience health problems that can be detected early through an eye exam, she says.

Bahadur is a firm believer in wearing protective eyewear, but her instructions to patients don't end with sunglasses. She cautions anyone that engages in any type of outdoor work to invest in a pair of safety glasses. The thick lenses with safety straps protect the eyes from materials that can cause serious damage to the eyes.

"Coast residents live an active lifestyle; they boat and fish and spend a lot of time working outdoors, either for leisure activities or for work," Bahadur says. "I treat many patients whose eyes have been injured while engaging in something as simple as bush-hogging a field or weed eating their lawn. It's important to wear sunglasses all year long, but it's just as important to switch to safety glasses for protection from objects that can cause serious damage if they enter the eyes at a high rate of speed."

Bahadur also advises older residents to have their vision assessed annually to make sure their eyeglass prescriptions are up to date and any vision problems are corrected to insure safe operation of their vehicle.



Bahadur donates new service to two first responders

BILOXI — From New Orleans to Mobile, Eye Associates of the South is the first to offer a newer, blade-free Z-LASIK machine for patients who want LASIK laser vision correction.

To share this new technology with the community, Rainna Bahadur, M.D., donated LASIK eye surgery to two active duty members of the Biloxi police and fire departments, who were chosen by their superiors.

This state-of-the-art LASIK machine is the Femtosecond LDV Laser. This new Z-LASIK technology by Ziemer creates a highly accurate flap on the eye's cornea during LASIK, without the use of a blade.

The Z-LASIK laser is literally easy on the eye. Its high-frequency beam is a 100 times less intense than earlier flap-making lasers, according to Ziemer. The benefits improve results and reduce healing time and rare complications from LASIK.

Bahadur thought of offering LASIK to area first responders because to the recent 10th anniversary of 9/11. "They're absolutely our everyday community heroes," she says. "If they can get rid of glasses or contacts, it will be a lot safer for them in their line of work."

Biloxi Senior Patrolman Robert McKeithen, 50, received LASIK from Bahadur and now has 20/20 vision, without wearing contacts or glasses. McKeithen says, "On the job, the issue often is my glasses fogging up. As a police officer, that's extremely dangerous. You never know at any time what comes over the police radio, and you gotta jump!"

He has broken eyeglasses while apprehending suspects and estimated he has replaced at least 40 pairs, mostly due to the job. "I'm ecstatic," he says of his LASIK results. "It's the best thing that's ever happened to me. I've also never won nothing in my life before, not a thing."

Bahadur is screening a Biloxi Fire Department firefighter to receive his LASIK next.