Winter Workplace Eye Protection

Vision loss is one of the 10 most common disabilities, yet 90 percent of eye injuries are preventable, and probably none are as preventable as those experienced during the winter months.

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According to the Centers for Disease Control, there are nearly 800,000 work-related eye injuries each year. Every day, approximately 2,000 U.S. workers receive medical treatment for eye injuries related to or sustained at work.

While eye injuries occur most often among those who operate heavy machinery or equipment with moving parts and among those who work in construction, many are caused by exposure to UV rays or ice and snow. Seventy percent of eye injuries are caused by an object or piece of equipment coming into contact with the eye, and 26 percent of eye injuries are due to exposure to harmful substances or environments. One of those environments is extreme temperatures and winter weather conditions.

Eye injuries come with significant costs: Prevent Blindness estimated $300 million annually in medical bills, compensation and lost productivity are the result of workplace eye injuries, with more than 27,000 lost work days being reported by private industry.
employees.

OSHA has established a wide range of standards regarding workplace eye and face protection to guard against chemical, environmental, radiological or mechanical irritants. But what do you need to know to keep workers’ eyes safe in winter weather conditions?

**UV Is Not a Summer-Only Hazard**

While most adults see a pair of shades as a fashion accessory, sunglasses are a critical health necessity. A significant number of Americans still are not aware of the health risk they take when going outside without protecting their eyes against ultraviolet (UV) radiation. In fact, one in four adults (26 percent) rarely or never wears sunglasses outside.

And it’s not just the bright summertime sun that puts us at risk. Every day, 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. But over a longer term, this exposure can accelerate serious eye health problems, including cataracts, macular degeneration, abnormal growths on the eye’s surface and even cancer of the eye and surrounding skin.

UV damages your eyes similar to how it damages skin. UV damage is cumulative, meaning that damage done to the eyes adds up over time, and once the damage has been done, it cannot be reversed. For this reason, it is never too early or too late to start protecting your eyes from damaging amounts of UV radiation. You can decrease your UV exposure by wearing sunglasses any time you are outdoors, year-round.

Although it can be easier to feel the impact of sun on skin in the summer, UV radiation is always present and can be even more damaging during colder months when many adults (and children) stop wearing UV protection. In winter months, UV rays can reflect off of snow and into the eyes. After a fresh snowfall or during winter sports activities, individuals can experience photokeratitis, also known as "snow blindness."

**3 Ways To Keep Eyes Safe This Winter**

With the weather changing and snowfall on the horizon, it can be easy to focus on staying warm and not on the safety of workers’ eyes. Cold weather, though, can be just as irritating to the eyes as the UV rays of summer. Whether you’re hitting the slopes or working in winter weather conditions, it remains important to protect your vision.

1. **Keep your eyes moist** – One of the main problems with winter weather is the dryness in the air caused by heating or frigidly cold air. Although it may be difficult, try not to sit directly next to heat sources so the dry air impacts your eyes as little as possible. The use of heaters or blowers creates dryness in the air and workers might 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** – Sunglasses are not just for summer! Actually, UV rays are almost twice as strong in the winter because snowy conditions can intensify and reflect the rays from the sun. While it may seem silly, wearing sunglasses outside during winter can help minimize the effect of UV rays by blocking almost 99 percent of UV light and by providing a barrier to the chilling winter winds.

Sunglasses particularly can be useful when doing any outdoor activities in the snow – work or play. If necessary, goggles also can be worn during outdoor activities to block any particles such as slush, ice or dirt from getting into the eyes.

Aside from protecting your eyes from the reflection from the snow, it is important to keep in mind that elevation plays an important role in eye safety during winter as well. At higher elevations, the air is much thinner, which means more UV rays are able to reach down through the atmosphere. Similarly, UV rays also are naturally higher near the equator. If you live or work in a high elevation or nearer the equator, you should be extra vigilant about the safety of your eyes this winter.
3. Opt for eyeglasses, not contacts – Contacts, because of their direct contact with the eyes, 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 make everything easier by reducing the contact with your eyes, making it simpler to keep your eyes moistened. So, if you do opt for contact lenses this winter, keep them extra moisturized.

Remember that eye safety and protection are not topics that are reserved for summertime weather. In winter, UV rays are magnified by snow, elevation and proximity to the equator, making it even more necessary to take precautions like wearing sunglasses and moisturizing with eye drops to keep your eyes safe all throughout the season.