

A stylized illustration of a woman with long, wavy brown hair, wearing blue-tinted sunglasses and a teal and black striped top. She has a slight smile. A pink starburst graphic is positioned near her eye.

The Eyes Are the Prize

*How to protect them
and preserve your vision*

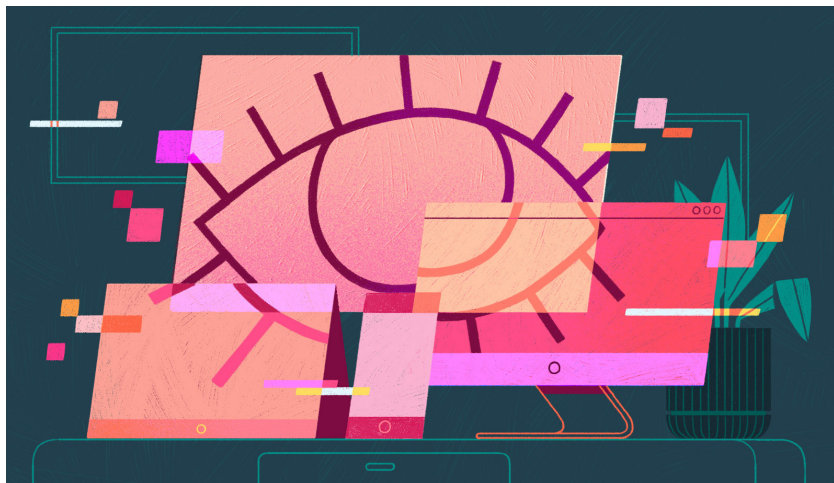
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WE WATCH OUR salt and fat intake to protect our hearts. We exercise and take calcium to protect our bones. We slather on sunscreen to protect our skin. But what can we do to protect our eyes? Turns out, quite a lot. We asked experts what lifestyle steps people should be taking to protect their vision and eye health.

Spring for some quality shades ...

“Protecting the eyes from ultraviolet light—sunlight—is very important,” says Esen Akpek, MD, an ophthalmology professor at Johns Hopkins University. “It’s one of the biggest



things in our environment to have an impact on the eyes. Ultraviolet light has been shown to have an effect on cataract development and macular degeneration.”

To shield your eyes, wear sunglasses certified to block out 99% to 100% of UVA and UVB light. Surprisingly, dark lenses aren't necessarily the most protective. “In fact, if the lenses are dark but not UV-protected, that's worse for your eyes, because when you're looking through dark lenses your pupils dilate, which lets more UV light inside to do damage,” says Dr. Akpek.

... and some sports glasses

You don't have to be doing construction or factory work to need protective eye-wear. Gardening, yardwork, home repairs and sports all pose the risk of trauma to the eye. The American

Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO) recommends sports glasses with polycarbonate lenses, which resist shattering, and eye protectors that have been tested to meet the American Society of Testing and Materials (ASTM) standards.

“I see people who've been gardening, leaned forward and gotten poked in the eye by a branch,” says Davinder Grover, MD, an ophthalmologist at Glaucoma Associates of Texas. “Or people working in the yard with weed whackers or lawn mowers that have caused objects like rocks to hit them in the eye.”

Take a break from screens

The AAO says there's no scientific evidence that the light from electronic screens damages eyes. But staring at a screen can leave eyes fatigued and may even blur vision. The National Institutes of Health recommends taking a break

every 20 minutes to look at something about 20 feet away for 20 seconds. Glasses that block blue light don't seem to do the trick, according to multiple studies, says Dr. Akpek.

One reason for eye fatigue during screen use is that people tend to blink less when staring at computer screens, and that can lead to dryness. "One of the best ways to prevent that is hydration with water—four or five glasses a day," says Dr. Grover. "If you still feel your eyes are dry or getting tired, or your vision is occasionally blurred, use a lubricating eye drop."

Eat for your eyes

Research shows that foods rich in vitamin C, vitamin E, zinc, lutein, zeaxanthin and omega-3 fatty acids are linked to lower risk for age-related macular degeneration, cataracts and maybe even dry eye.

- ◆ For omega-3 fatty acids, look for fish like salmon, tuna and halibut.
- ◆ For lutein and zeaxanthin, eat dark leafy greens like spinach, kale and collard greens.
- ◆ For lots of vitamin C, grab citrus, strawberries, tomatoes, red and green peppers, and broccoli.
- ◆ For vitamin E, choose peanuts, almonds, sunflower seeds, avocado, pumpkin and asparagus.
- ◆ For zinc, good sources are beef, fortified cereals and especially oysters.

You can skip supplements that claim to boost eye health, says Dr. Grover.

Stop those bad habits

First, the obvious: Smoking isn't just bad for your lungs; it can harm eyes too. "Smoking is terrible," says Dr. Akpek. "It causes dry eyes, makes thyroid eye disease worse and correlates with severe macular degeneration." Smoking also increases the risk of cataracts and can harm the optic nerve.

Also, try not to rub your eyes. "Rubbing makes inflammation worse," says Dr. Akpek. "The more you rub, the more itchy your eyes will get. And rubbing has been linked to thinning and bulging of the cornea. It can lead to infections." Instead, "take medication or use drops for allergies or dry eye," says Dr. Grover.

Repair the air

Indoor heating and air conditioning can dry out the air ... and the eyes. Outdoor cold and wind can be drying, too, while pollution and allergens can cause irritation. In addition to lubricating eye drops, "air purifiers and humidifiers are our friends," says Dr. Akpek.

FINALLY, don't forget to see an eye specialist for a checkup. Not all eye problems are noticeable, and all are best treated when found early. "For most people, unless there are noticeable problems, the AAO recommends a baseline exam by an ophthalmologist at age 40, and then follow-ups as recommended by the doctor," says Dr. Grover. For more information on how to protect and care for your eyes, visit the AAO's patient website, eyesmart.org. **R**