

Right shades prevent damage to sailors' eyes

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Sunglasses are wonderful things. They can reduce eye irritation and eyestrain. That, in some people, reduces associated headaches.

Sunglasses can help you see better under some conditions. One way is by reducing the glare from the water.

They even offer some physical protection for the eyes, protection against windblown dust (which generally isn't much of a problem for sailors) and other hazards. Getting slapped in the eye with a sheet is painful.

Sunglasses even offer some protection against wind and the irritation it can cause. That becomes especially important toward the end of a breezy noon-to-6 p.m. watch.

But, perhaps most important of all, they can keep you seeing better longer, helping preserve vision through years of the kinds of exposure sailors' eyes encounter, says Michael Boulton, Ph.D. He is a University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston professor and director of that institution's age-related macular degeneration center.

Eye protection, starting with sunglasses, is more important than many sailors realize. "If you enjoy sailing when you're 20 and don't take precautions," Boulton said, "you may not be sailing when you're 60." The reason is deterioration of the macula.

The macula is a small but very sensitive part of the retina, the tissue at the back of the eye. Receptors there convert light to electrical impulses that the brain then converts to images. The macula gives us central vision and enables us to see detail. It lets sailors discern the shape of a distant buoy or see a tiny symbol on a nautical chart.

One way to damage the eyes is to look directly at the sun. Most sailors have more sense than to do that. "A more chronic type of damage," Boulton said, "a slow and insidious buildup of damage to tissues in the retina, can result from exposure to bright light, especially sunlight." Fair-skinned, blue-eyed people are particularly at risk.

Macular degeneration often develops in older people, Boulton said.

"About 30 percent of those older than 75 experience age-related macular degeneration and many have significant visual impairment, with at least some loss of central vision.

"Significant light exposure in childhood through the 30s can contribute to this condition."

Sailors get lots of direct sunlight. They also get a lot of reflected light, from the water and from their own boat's light-colored deck and superstructure.

People try to minimize glare by wearing sunglasses, just about all of which will block cataract-causing ultraviolet radiation.

"If you wear normal sunglasses, there's a gap around the outside," Boulton said.

But, with sunglasses on, the pupil actually expands. Light getting in around the edges of the sunglasses has more chance of getting into the eye.

So he strongly recommends that sailors wear wrap-around sunglasses. But not just any wrap-arounds.

"Light we see is made basically of all the colors in the rainbow," he said.

"It's the blue light, which you see a lot of on the water, which is most damaging. So, when you get sunglasses, make sure not only that they're wrap-arounds, but that they're also blue-blockers."

He advises trying sunglasses out to be sure they do the sun-blocking job and that you can see with them on.

I'd add a suggestion that, once you find a suitable pair, buy two and take both when you go sailing. There are few things worse than feeling the crunch of your favorite — and only — pair of sunglasses when you sit on them, especially on the first day of an offshore trip of a week or two.

John Ira Petty, a sailing instructor and licensed captain, is the sailing columnist for The Daily News.