

Parent's Guide to Eye Health and Athletics

Q&A with VSP Optometrist, Dr. Paul Berman



Playing sports is one of the best opportunities for kids to develop physical, motor, and visual skills while having fun. Parents want to provide their kids with the best equipment and training to be safe and successful, but many are forgetting a crucial component—eye protection.

More than 42,000 sports-related eye injuries occur each year. According to Prevent Blindness America, an estimated 90% of these injuries could've been avoided.

To help explain how parents can protect their children's eyes while improving their game, Dr. Paul Berman answers these important questions:

Q: What are your recommendations with respect to eye health and sports?

A: The greatest risk to a child's vision is eye injury, which in most cases is sports-related. In fact, every thirteen minutes, a child goes to the emergency room due to a sports-related eye injury. To help protect kids' eyes, provide them with sports-certified, protective eyewear made specifically to withstand impact and provide UV protection. Protective eyewear is also available with prescription lenses. Regular glasses and sunglasses with non-shatterproof lenses aren't recommended—they can be extremely dangerous if broken during play. Be sure to bring your child to an eye doctor to be properly examined and fitted. Even children who don't need vision correction should have their eyes examined and protected.

Q: What types of sport-related eye injuries can occur?

A: Sports-related eye injuries can include:

- corneal abrasions (painful scrape or scratch on the cornea);
- inflamed iris;
- fracture of the eye socket;
- blunt trauma;
- penetrating injuries;
- traumatic cataract, causing blood to spill into the eye's anterior chamber;
- swollen or detached retinas;
- blindness.

Q: What sports have the most eye-related injuries?

A: Sports with bats and/or airborne balls at eye level have the most eye-related injuries.

- High risk: basketball, baseball, lacrosse, field hockey, tennis, soccer
- Low risk: track and field, swimming

Sports with the highest risk of eye injury:

- Children over 14: basketball
- Children under 14: baseball

Q: At what age can children start wearing contacts instead of sports goggles? Are there any concerns with contact use?

A: Unless there's a compelling reason to fit earlier, doctors generally fit children as young as seven years old with contacts. A doctor will be able to teach the child how to properly insert contact lenses (which can take a few visits) but children must take responsibility for cleaning and changing contacts on a regular basis. Parents need to monitor younger children to make sure they're using the contacts correctly. Contacts can help give a better peripheral scope than prescription lenses, however they lose the protective factor that sports goggles provide. It's recommended that even if a child wears contacts, that he or she also wears protective sports goggles.

Q: What sports require the best visual acuity?

A: Typically in sports, the smaller and quicker the ball, the more precise your visual acuity needs to be. Hitting a baseball is one of the most demanding tasks of eye-hand coordination.

Q: If my child is underperforming on the field, could they have a vision problem?

A: If your child has difficulty with sports that require accurate eye-hand coordination, they may need corrective lenses or may be suffering from an underlying vision problem. It is important to bring your child in for a comprehensive eye exam once every year to track his/her visual development. There are many visual skills besides just visual acuity that a child needs to excel and enjoy playing sports, such as depth perception, peripheral awareness, and eye coordination, to name a few.

Q: What else is important for parents to know?

A: In chemistry class, students are required to wear protective glasses. Why would you take any less precaution with other activities?

Protecting your kid's eyes now with the proper equipment and ensuring that they receive annual eye exams will help them to stay on top of their game, both on the field and off. Don't let an eye injury or vision problem limit your child's future or decrease their ability and enjoyment of sports.

For a great list of protective eyewear recommended for various sports, please see our article on The Center at vsp.com.