Eclipse blindness facts

- Your eyes have lenses in them: using them to look at the sun is like using a magnifying glass to concentrate the sun's rays. This causes solar retinopathy (or eclipse retinopathy if you're looking at an eclipse).
- The eye damage caused by looking directly at the sun occurs on the retina: the back of they eyeball where the eye’s lens projects light.
- Eclipse retinopathy can be immediate and permanent, immediate and reversible, or delayed and progressive depending on the circumstances of exposure.
- Solar retinopathy is NOT the same as “snow blindness.” Snow blindness, also known as photokeratitis, is essentially a sunburn of the cornea (outer layer of eye) and is usually self-resolving (though extremely painful).
- Solar retinopathy does not require a true burn caused by heat (like when focusing the sun’s beam with a converging lens such as a magnifying glass). In solar retinopathy, the retina needs be exposed to direct sun for less time and experience less increase in temperature on the retina than would cause a burn.
- Rather, solar retinopathy is mostly caused by photochemical damage. Molecules in the retina are exquisitely sensitive (their response to light images projected onto the retina create the chemical signals sent to our brain). These molecules are damaged by excessively bright light. (Similar injuries have occurred during eye surgery when the retina is exposed to excessive light from surgical tools.)
- Children are at increased risk of solar retinopathy because the lenses in their eyes are clear and crystalline—they do not block UV and infrared light like those of adults.
- Although it takes several seconds of direct sun exposure to cause solar retinopathy, that exposure is cumulative over time. Even looking at the sun for a fraction of a second can cause damage, if done repeatedly during the 2+ hours when the sun will be partially blocked during the eclipse could cause eye damage.

Signs and Symptoms

- Signs of eclipse retinopathy include:
  - Reduced visual acuity (bad vision),
  - Central scotomas (blind spots),
  - Chromatopsia (disruption or tinting of color perception),
  - Metamorphosia (disruption or distortion of shape perception), and
  - Photophobia (light sensitivity)
- Solar retinopathy is thought to contribute to age-related macular degeneration later in life, a common cause of progressive blindness.

Treatment

If you think someone has damaged their eyes by looking at the sun:

- STOP looking directly at the sun.
- Go indoors, preferably into a dark room and rest your eyes.
- There is no effective medical treatment for solar retinopathy.
- Follow up later with an eye specialist. Testing can be done to determine the extent of damage, but there is no effective medical treatment for solar retinopathy at this time.
- Follow up with the patient's primary eye doctor in 1-3 days.
- Vision often recovers after sun damage, but not always. Data are very limited, but in one case series of four patients, three had recovery of normal vision within 1-3 months. One patient’s vision remained affected one year later.
**How to view the eclipse safely**

- During totality (the period of about 2-1/2 minutes when the sun is completely blocked by the moon), it is safe to look directly at the eclipse. The problem is this: you won’t know if it’s totality unless you look!
- Any time before or after totality, when any portion of the sun is visible, looking directly at the eclipse can cause eye damage.
- The safest way to view the eclipse is by an indirect method:
  - The pinhole technique: put a pinhole in a piece of card stock. Hold the paper in the sun. Project the pinhole of light passing through the card onto a second card about 3 feet away.
  - The mirror technique: Use a small, flat mirror (or a mirror covered except for a circle about ¼” diameter) to reflect sunlight on a nearby wall or object. The shape of the reflection will mimic the shape of the sun.
- Commercial welder’s glasses shade 14 or darker are felt to provide sufficient protection.
- Disposable “eclipse glasses” are widely available, but their efficacy has not been fully tested. If you use eclipse glasses or any other handheld viewing device, make sure it is rated as having an optical density (OD) of at least 5. Look for evidence that they're certified to meet the ISO 12312-2 international standard for safe direct viewing of the Sun.
- If your eyes hurt or your vision changes, stop looking at the eclipse immediately. Any additional viewing will lead to accumulating damage.

**Unsafe ways to view the eclipse**

- **DO NOT** look directly at the sun when ANY part of it is visible, even a sliver.
- **DO NOT** look at the sun repeatedly, even for a split second.
- **DO NOT** look at the sun through makeshift filters, such as exposed film, CDs, sunglasses, smoked glass, or looking directly at the sun’s reflection on water.
- **DO NOT** look at the sun through binoculars, telescopes, or any other magnifying device unless it is properly fitted with a solar filter.
- **DO NOT** look at the sun through a camera, smartphone, or any other device without a proper solar filter (ISO 12312-2 certified).