Ouch – My Eye! A Guide to Common Eye Injuries

Some eye injuries heal on their own; others demand urgent medical attention. Here’s how to tell the difference.

It’s a beautiful Saturday. A perfect time to mow your lawn, trim the trees, and – ouch! Apparently, it’s also time to get the proverbial stick in your eye. You’re tempted to say it’s just a scratch. After all, who wants to spend their Saturday in the ER?

Depending on the injury, delaying medical attention could lead to vision loss.

“The vast majority of eye injuries occur while working in or around the house. Hammering, cutting, sawing, grinding, power-washing, weed-eating, and mowing can all lead to serious injuries. If you are injured this way, you should see an ophthalmologist immediately, as foreign material can become trapped under the eyelids or embedded in the cornea,” says Dr. James Banta, an ophthalmology expert at Bascom Palmer Eye Institute, part of the University of Miami Health System.

Protecting your eyes
When it comes to eye injuries, prevention is key. “One hundred percent of eye injuries are preventable, if you wear safety glasses, preferably safety goggles, made of at least 2mm polycarbonate. These goggles are inexpensive and can be purchased at any hardware store or ordered online,” says Dr. Banta.

Dr. Banta also urges injury prevention for elderly people. “The elderly are often victims of falls in the home, which can lead to devastating eye injuries. Make certain
that walkways are clear of obstacles and that appropriate walking assistance devices (canes, walkers) are used at all times. Also, install railings in bathrooms – this is the most common location for slips and falls among the elderly.”

**Evaluating eye injuries**

If you experience any of the following symptoms, seek medical help right away:

- Pain or difficulty seeing
- Torn or cut eyelid
- Blood in the clear part of your eye
- Abnormal pupil size or shape
- Feeling like something is under your eyelid or under your eye that you can’t remove
- One eye protrudes more than the other
- One or both eyes do not move normally

**First things first**

Regardless of the injury, avoid rubbing, touching or placing pressure on your eye. Do not put medication or ointment in your eye and, unless it’s an eyelash, don’t remove what is stuck in your eye. If you get a tiny particle in your eye, gently lift your upper lid over the lashes of your lower lid and blink rapidly so your tears cleanse it out. If you still feel something, see a doctor.

If you get sand or dust in your eye, don’t rub. Flush out your eye with eyewash. If your eye still feels scratchy, carefully and loosely bandage your eye and go to the ER or nearest eye doctor.

**Common culprits**

Some injuries occur more often at home, school or work. Dr. Banta shares his tips for dealing with common accidents.
Chemical burns
If you are splashed with a chemical, flush your eyes immediately with plenty of water. Get in the shower or stick your head under the sink and let water flow over the eye for several minutes. You should then seek medical attention immediately.

Hard or soft knocks
A cold compress lessens swelling and pain from a blow to the eye, but don’t apply pressure. If there’s pain, poor vision or a black eye, go to your doctor or ER right away. Even a light blow can cause eye damage.

Cuts or puncture wounds
Remember these three don’ts:

1. Don’t flush your eye with water.
2. Don’t try to remove an object stuck in your eye.
3. Don’t rub your eye.
4. Don’t take aspirin or NSAIDs like ibuprofen. They can increase bleeding.

Here’s what you should do.

1. Shield your eye.
2. Cut out the bottom of a paper cup, and tape it lightly to the bones around your eye to protect it while you seek medical help. Do that right away.

Not all eye injuries are serious, but it’s better to sacrifice your Saturday by going to the ER than to sacrifice your vision.

Nancy Moreland is a contributing writer for the UMiami Health News blog. She has
written for several major health care systems and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Her writing also appears in the Chicago Tribune.