

Best ways to protect your child from eye injury

BY CONSTANCE SKEDGELL

Did you know that 43 percent of all eye injuries — including those in adults — occur in children under the age of 15? While children under 5 account for only 8 percent of such injuries, the damage can impair their vision and even endanger an eye. Should you be concerned? Yes, according to Dawn P. Rush, M.D., pediatric ophthalmologist at Northern Westchester Hospital.

“Small children are active, inquisitive and daring, which make them accident-prone,” Rush said. “They are unsteady walkers, yet love to explore everything. The eye injuries they suffer damage the orbit (eye socket), cornea (external eye) and the globe (eyeball) itself. Blunt trauma can injure the retina.”

The good news is, there are many effective ways to prevent pediatric eye injuries. Dr. Rush explains common causes of ocular accidents and the injuries they cause, and provides empowering advice on your role in protecting a child’s eyes from harm from birth to age 7.

Many injuries result from objects that are thrown, such as “toys used as missiles.” These can scratch the cornea or, more seriously, produce blood in the eye, which can cause glaucoma and result in permanent visual loss. Severe injury occurs when a sharp or small object traveling at high speed penetrates and cuts the eye. If the globe ruptures, blindness and even loss of the eye can result. A playground is often the site of potential eye injury, with kids throwing sand, dirt or pebbles. Lodged in the eye, these foreign bodies can cause scratches to the cornea, infection and more serious types of injury.

Interactions with animals, such as family pets, can damage children’s eyes. “A young child is often at the same level as the dog, and about the same size,” Rush said. “The child can be seen as a threat. This happens especially at the homes of relatives, with a dog that doesn’t often see the child.” Injuries include eyelid laceration or teeth puncture wounds on the lid or eyeball.

Then there’s the broad category of inju-



ries that result from little kids being wobbly and prone to falling at the level of table corners and the edges of counters. These stumbles can cause a black eye, swollen eyelid, corneal scratch or bleeding under the conjunctiva (the clear film covering the white of the eye). When curious kids open cabinets, falling pots can cause eye trauma. If cleaning supplies are present, a “chemical splash” can seriously damage eyes.

Scratch injuries are common in babies and toddlers, often incurred when they move suddenly while being held, and the mother’s or infant’s own nail catches the eye. In addition, sports like Little League baseball, that involve a flying ball small enough to fit into the eye’s socket, put the eye at high risk, Rush cautioned.

How can you prevent injuries?

Childproof your house, which involves “thinking like a sleuth.” Move heavy objects out of reach and lock cabinets containing poisons and cleaning fluids. Latch doors leading to stairs or install a gate. Cushion all sharp corners. Watch out for dogs that aren’t used to little kids.

A child playing sports with an eye-sized ball needs protective eyewear with a polycarbonate lens, prescribed by a pediatric ophthalmologist or optometrist. As lens material is rarely identified on labels, have your gear checked by either specialist.

“The mechanism of most pediatric eye injuries is twofold: the home is not child-proofed and the parent turns away for a second, to answer the phone or flip the eggs,” Rush said. “To make matters worse, the parent, who is the first triage person, typically does not know what happened.”

Rush’s maxim is, “Supervision plus protection equals happy play.”

What to do in case of injury

If you see or suspect an eye injury, Rush advises first examining the eye and attempting to figure out the cause. “Try to discourage the child from rubbing the eye,” she said. “If the eyeball is punctured, rubbing or squeezing will disrupt the eye’s structure and fluids can leak out.”

Next, follow this decision tree:

- Is your child complaining of eye pain or something in the eye? Use sterile saline solution to fully irrigate it. Rush recommends keeping a bottle of the solution readily at hand for this purpose. After irrigating the eye, wait.

- Is it still scratchy? If so, see a physician.

- Do you suspect a chemical injury? Immediately irrigate the eye, either in the shower, at the sink or with a sterile saline solution. Then seek immediate medical attention.

- Did your child report being poked in the eye? If the eye is puffy or tearing, if vision is blurred or the eye is bleeding, immediately call your pediatrician or go to the emergency room.

- Severe injury — causing pain, reduced or double vision, a very swollen eye or if a ball hit the eye — requires urgent care from a pediatrician, pediatric ophthalmologist or ER doctor.

“When in doubt, check it out,” Rush said. “You can never be too careful when it comes to a child’s eyes.”