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EYE INJURIES CAN TAKE THE FUN OUT OF ANY SPORTS ACTIVITY

Prevent Blindness America Urges Everyone to Protect Their Eyes While Playing Sports

CHICAGO (Aug. 16, 2006) – When Jackie Stillmaker, age 17, went swimming three years ago with her contact lenses in, she never thought her eyes could be permanently damaged. Like many of us, she didn't know she was at risk for a blinding eye infection, Acanthamoeba keratitis, a condition where a microscopic, water-borne parasite became trapped beneath her contact lens. The parasite infected her cornea for two years. Jackie endured three corneal transplants to eradicate this parasite from her eye.

“Before this happened to Jackie, I had never even heard of Acanthamoeba keratitis much less known how to prevent it,” said Mary Beth Stillmaker, Jackie's mother. “Once her doctors were able to diagnose the problem, so much damage had already been done.”

The American Academy of Ophthalmology estimates that there are 40,000 sports-related eye injuries to Americans every year. In fact, in 2005, the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) estimates that there were more than 2,400 eye injuries from swimming alone.

But, swimming is not the only sport that can be dangerous to eyes. The CPSC also estimates that 4,905 Americans had eye injuries related to basketball (the highest of any sport) and 2,747 eye injuries from baseball. Prevent Blindness America, the nation's oldest volunteer eye health and safety organization, has dedicated September as Sports Eye Health and Safety Awareness Month to educate the public on how to make sure their eyes are safe while playing sports.

“It is so important to remember to make eye protection part of the game plan,” said Daniel D. Garrett, senior vice president of Prevent Blindness America. “And because design has improved so much over the years, goggles and face shields now come in a variety of styles that won't impair your performance.”

Up to 90 percent of all sports-related eye injuries can be prevented just by wearing the proper eye protection. Lenses should be made of polycarbonate and have an American Society of Testing Materials (ASTM) label, indicating they meet the standards of the ASTM for the specific sport.

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Wearing eyeglasses without protection is never a good idea as the glass can break and enter or scratch the eye. Just this year, the state of New Jersey passed a bill to protect children's eyes in sports (New Jersey State Assembly Bill A-2091/State Senate Bill 1970). The law now states that any child who wears corrective glasses and participates in any school, community or government-sponsored sports programs, will be required to wear protective eyewear meeting ASTM standards. The law also provides grants to low-income families to help offset the costs of purchasing the equipment.

"We applaud New Jersey Assemblyman Peter J. Barnes, Jr., and New Jersey Senator Paul Sarlo for sponsoring this incredibly important bill to protect vision in children," added Garrett. "We hope it will inspire other states in the very near future to follow suit."

Eye injuries can include painful corneal abrasions, blunt trauma and penetrating injuries. Severe injuries can result in vision loss and in some cases, blindness. In addition, radiation injuries can occur from extended exposure to sunlight, meaning protecting the eyes from UV radiation is also important to remember. Goggles with UV protection should especially be worn while snow skiing and snow boarding as well as water skiing and other water sports.

For more information on sports eye health and safety, contact lens safety, and a listing of ASTM-approved eye protection, call Prevent Blindness America at 1-800-331-2020 or visit www.preventblindness.org.

About Prevent Blindness America

Founded in 1908, Prevent Blindness America is the nation's leading volunteer eye health and safety organization dedicated to fighting blindness and saving sight. Focused on promoting a continuum of vision care, Prevent Blindness America touches the lives of millions of people each year through public and professional education, advocacy, vision screening, community and patient service programs and research. These services are made possible through the generous support of the American public. Together with a network of affiliates, divisions and chapters, it's committed to eliminating preventable blindness in America. For more information, or to make a contribution to the sight-saving fund, call 1-800-331-2020 or visit us on the Web at www.preventblindness.org.

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