

Why children need sunglasses

Eye protection for kids reduces risk of cataracts, blindness later

If children begin wearing sunglasses at an early age—even as infants—it could help reduce their risk of cataracts and blindness in later years and save the country billions of dollars annually, according to Dr. Malcolm Ing, chief of ophthalmology at Kapiolani Medical Center for Women and Children. Ing says that just as the awareness of the dangers of skin cancer has prompted parents to protect their children's skin with sunscreen, so should they shield their children's eyes from the sun-induced damage of cataracts.

While cataracts can occur at birth, most cases are caused when long-term sun exposure causes proteins in the lens of the eye to oxidize, clump and cloud over, thus diminishing vision. If left untreated, cataracts eventually can cause blindness. The process takes decades, but if current trends continue, by the time Hawaii's children reach the age of 75, more than 40 percent of them will suffer from cataracts. Worldwide, cataracts have robbed an estimated 50 million people of their vision.

Cataracts are treated by surgically removing the clouded lens and replacing it with a clear plastic one. This outpatient procedure is done under local anesthetic and is successful in more than 95 percent of cases. But surgery alters the patient's vision, requiring new contacts or corrective lenses.

Ing says that many cataract surgeries would be unnecessary if people had protected their eyes from sun exposure in their younger years.

"We've known since the mid 1980s that most cataracts are directly linked to sun exposure," he says. "Since we get 80 percent of our lifetime sun exposure by age 18, parents need

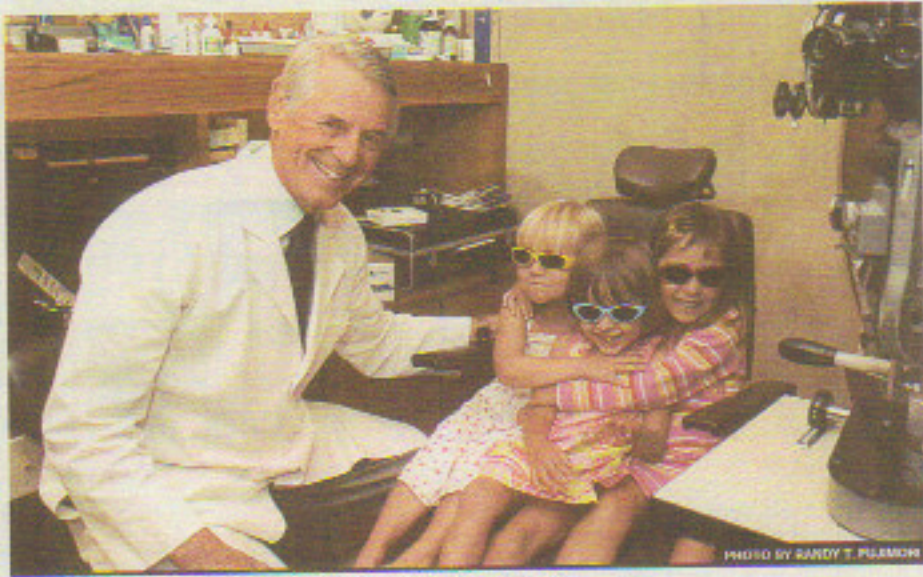


PHOTO BY RANDY T. FLEMMING

Ing in 2003 published a study of infants with misaligned eyes.

to start protecting children when they are young."

Along with people who live in other sunny states, Hawaii residents are at the highest risk for cataracts, Ing says. He has campaigned at local schools to make it mandatory for children playing outside during recess to wear sunglasses, but so far his efforts have been politely rebuffed.

"I went to Punahou and Iolani and said they should be worrying more about children's skin and eyes," he notes. "At Iolani, they have a sun safe program so I thought they'd be particularly interested. At both schools, I got a gentle but definite 'No.'"

He says school administrators complain that there are already too many restrictions on children, and teachers have academic priorities. They also are concerned about the loss of eye-to-eye contact if children are required to walk around campus wearing dark glasses.

Ing also received a lukewarm response when he met three years ago with administrators at the state Department of Health, but he hopes the growing concern about health care costs might mean the current administration would be more receptive.

He says state and health insurance carriers would be wise to embrace the idea of protect-

A leader with vision

At his offices at Kapiolani Medical Center for Women and Children, Dr. Malcolm Ing treats mild to serious eye conditions in adults and children. He also is a leader in eye research.



Dr. Malcolm Ing

In 2003, he published a study of infants with misaligned eyes in Hawaii, on the mainland and in Europe, concluding that eyes need to be surgically aligned within the first year if the child is to gain proper depth perception. The study was published in the *Journal of American Association*

of Ophthalmology and Strabismus and helped change medical opinion, which had previously held that it was sufficient for the surgery to be performed by age two.

The Hawaii-born and Punahou-, Harvard- and Yale-educated Ing is one of only 220 ophthalmologists nationwide and the only one in Hawaii to be a member of the prestigious American Ophthalmologic Society—a select group of the country's more than 20,000 practicing ophthalmologists.

Ing, 70, currently is embarking on a study to determine the ideal age to surgically implant corrective lenses into the eyes of children who are born with cataracts.

expenditure.

Health care analysts estimate that more than 50 percent of cataract extractions and associated costs would be eliminated if cataracts could be delayed a decade. Ing says that the use of sunglasses, particularly by young children, would go a long way toward achieving that goal.

While the payoff for the investment in sunglasses would be

decades away, Ing points out that children are regularly vaccinated for diseases that may not threaten their health for years, so why not take steps to help protect them from cataracts?

The cost to do so is minor. A pair of UVA - UVB protective and impact-resistant sunglasses—which he recommends—costs only \$15 to \$20.

Ing realizes getting children to wear sunglasses will take a change in public attitude. "Parents and peers have to get past the social stigma of 10-year-olds wearing sunglasses," he says. "By the time children are in their late teens, many of them wear sunglasses, but look at all those years of unprotected sun exposure."

The incidence of cataracts also can be reduced if people took another simple step—eat more fruits and vegetables.

"Consuming high levels of antioxidants, including fruits and vegetables rich in vitamin C, is associated with delayed development of cataracts," Ing says. Among people who consume more than 1.5 daily servings of fruits and vegetables, the risk of cataracts is reduced fivefold.

Those who eat a lot of carotenoids—a substance found in carrots and other yellow or orange fruits and vegetables—were found to have a 39 percent lower risk for cataract extraction. A Harvard University study found beta-carotene-rich foods—such as spinach, broccoli, corn and tomato sauce—also significantly lower risk of cataracts.

Ing says that helping prevent cataracts comes down to making simple lifestyle choices for our children—feeding them more fruits and vegetables and having them wear protective sunglasses.

"I suppose it's too much to expect that use of sunglasses would be made mandatory, like the use of children's seat belts," Ing says. "But we should at least encourage these things. Making better choices now can help save our children from unnecessary health problems and health costs later in life."

ing young eyes from the sun. "They'd save millions if they just delayed the onset of cataracts by five or 10 years," he asserts.

In fact, the cost to the country of treating cataracts is staggering. More than 1.2 million age-related cataract extractions are performed in the U.S. each year at a cost of \$5 billion. It is the largest single Medicare