

Keep your eyes safe on the farm

(Melbourne, June 24 2005) If you work outside, then your sight is most probably deteriorating and this could have serious effects on your safety. But you could prevent vision loss by having regular eye tests and implementing some simple safety procedures.

Research shows that Australians who spend even moderate time in the summer sun without appropriate eye protection are twice as likely to develop dangerous vision complications later in life.

“The likelihood of eye problems increases with prolonged exposure to ultraviolet light (UV) and this puts the eye sight of many Australian farmers at risk,” Jennifer Gersbeck, CEO of Vision 2020 Australia said.

“The good news is that most conditions that cause vision loss are either correctable or preventable and so many people could be preserving their sight through regular eye tests that will detect problems early and allow the best treatment,” Ms Gersbeck said.

“Wide brimmed hats and sunglasses are among some of the simple preventative measures which farmers should be using to preserve their sight,” she said.

Specialist ophthalmologist, John McKenzie, says pterygia and cataracts are among the common eye conditions experienced by farmers.

Pterygia are an overgrowth of tissue which usually grows on the inner or nasal side of the eye and can cause discomfort, and if more severe, can distort vision.

Cataracts are a clouding of the lens inside the eye and cannot be seen by the naked eye. Usually the results of cataracts are gradual with a painless worsening of sight and a marked increase in glare sensitivity.

“We encourage anyone who is aged over 50, has experienced a change in their eye sight, or has diabetes or a family history of eye disease to visit an optometrist or ophthalmologist, or speak to a doctor about their eyes,” Ms Gersbeck said.

“We also advise anyone who spends a lot of time outside to have regular check-ups as UV light can damage your eyesight,” she said.

Potential vision loss could be prevented by doing the following:

- Having regular eye tests: so that problems are picked up and treated early
- Quit smoking – smoking increases the risk of cataract and macular degeneration
- Wear a brimmed hat as UV light can damage your eyesight. A hat will not only protect your head from sunburn, but will reduce by at least half the amount of UV radiation reaching your eyes
- Wear a good pair of UV- absorbing sunglasses as these can reduce the amount of UV reaching your eyes and cut the amount of glare. Wrap-around sunglasses are best as they block UV radiation that can slip around the sides of conventional sunglasses
- Avoid the sun: in summer, three-quarters of outdoors UV exposure occurs between 10 am and 4 pm. Staying out of the sun between those times will significantly reduce your UV exposure.

Hamilton optometrist, Glenn Howell, said preventing potential eye injuries was also important, especially when conducting activities such as grinding, hammering or fencing.

“Prevention is better than cure. The best way to avoid accidents is to stop them before they happen. This can be done through using correct, well maintained eye safety equipment and replacing glass lenses with plastic ones,” Mr Howell said.

What causes low vision?

About 75 per cent of vision loss in Australia is caused by five conditions.¹

- **Age-related macular degeneration** – a leading cause of blindness. Nearly one person in four who lives into their nineties will eventually lose vision from this condition.
- **Cataract** – the most common of all elective surgery procedures and the eye condition responsible for the largest single direct health cost. However, cataract surgery is one of the most cost effective operations.
- **Diabetic Eye Disease** – almost all vision loss caused by this condition can be prevented by timely treatment.
- **Glaucoma** – early diagnosis and treatment are important to control glaucoma and protect sight. Half of those with glaucoma are undiagnosed and untreated.
- **Refractive Error** – over half of the people who present with visual impairment could have their vision improved with the correct glasses.

Did you know?

¹ From *Clear Insight* report by Access Economics Pty Ltd – August 2004.

- Vision loss is projected to increase from 5.4 per cent of Australians over 40 today to 6.5 per cent – which will total around 800,000 people by 2024.
- Blindness is set to increase by 74 per cent over the next two decades.
- The direct health cost of treating eye disease was \$1.8 billion in 2004.
- In Australia, the cost of eye disorders has doubled over the past decade.

For more information: visit www.saveyoursight.org.au

About Vision 2020 Australia

Vision 2020 Australia is a national partnership of over 40 Australian-based organisations involved in eye care service delivery, eye research, education and development, low vision support, vision rehabilitation, professional assistance and community support.

Established in October 2000, **Vision 2020 Australia's** aim is to eliminate avoidable blindness and vision loss by the year 2020 and to ensure that blindness and vision impairment are no longer barriers to full participation in the community.

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