

Solar Eclipse 2026: A Retina Specialist's Guide to Protecting Your Eyes

On Wednesday 12 August 2026, the UK will experience its most significant solar eclipse since 1999, with more than 90% of the Sun obscured in some parts of the country.

It will be a wonderful event, but looking directly at the Sun without appropriate protection can potentially cause permanent damage to your sight.

As a medical retina specialist, here are the key things I would like you to know.

How can an eclipse damage your eyes?

Looking directly at the Sun exposes the retina (the light-sensitive tissue at the back of the eye) to extremely intense light.

This can cause solar retinopathy, an injury particularly affecting the macula, the specialised central part of the retina that gives us our sharpest vision for reading, recognising faces and seeing fine detail.

One of the problems is that the retina has no pain receptors. You may therefore have no pain or immediate warning that damage is occurring.

What symptoms can solar retinopathy cause?

Symptoms may not be apparent immediately and can include:

- blurred central vision
- a dark or missing spot in the centre of your vision
- distortion, where straight lines appear bent or wavy
- altered colour vision
- difficulty reading or seeing fine detail

Some people recover over time, but retinal damage can be permanent. There is no proven treatment that can reliably reverse established solar retinopathy, making prevention particularly important.

Is a quick glance safe?

There is no reliably safe amount of time to look directly at the Sun without appropriate protection.

After the UK's 1999 eclipse, around 70 cases of visual problems were reported to the Royal College of Ophthalmologists - and around 40% of those affected reported looking at the eclipse for less than a minute.

Can I wear ordinary sunglasses?

No.

Ordinary sunglasses, however dark, are not designed for direct solar viewing. Wearing two or more pairs together does not make them safe.

If viewing the Sun directly, use purpose-made eclipse glasses that comply with the ISO 12312-2 international safety standard. Check that they are undamaged and follow the manufacturer's instructions.

What about cameras, binoculars and telescopes?

Never look directly at the Sun through binoculars, a telescope or a camera unless you are using an appropriate solar filter specifically designed for that equipment.

Optical devices concentrate the Sun's energy and require specialist protection.

What is the safest way to watch?

The safest option is indirect viewing, such as watching a reputable live broadcast or using a suitable projection method.

If you choose to view the Sun directly, use genuine ISO 12312-2 compliant eclipse glasses and supervise children particularly carefully.

Avoid homemade filters or improvised eye protection.

What if I accidentally look at the Sun?

Don't panic, but don't continue looking.

If you subsequently notice blurred or distorted central vision, a new dark or missing spot, altered colour vision or difficulty seeing fine detail, see an eye-care professional.

A final word

A solar eclipse is a rare and fascinating event, and I hope you enjoy it.

My advice as a retina specialist is simple:

Enjoy the eclipse, but don't risk your central vision for a better view.

If in doubt, view it indirectly.

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