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American Academy of Ophthalmology warns Parents to Leave Fireworks to the Professionals

Eye M.D.s Offer Tips for Fireworks Safety

SAN FRANCISCO – Imagine a sandy-haired 12-year-old who is the best hitter on his little league baseball team. Like many boys his age, he dreams that one day he will play shortstop for the New York Yankees.

One July 4th, after a winning game, the boy's father celebrates by grilling hamburgers and hotdogs at a backyard party. Later, it is time for fireworks.

The father, who illegally purchased Roman candles, bottle rockets and firecrackers, asks his children and wife to stand 60 feet away, a distance he believes is safe. For awhile, it is great fun and everybody enjoys the exhilaration that comes from watching and listening to the explosions.

Then things go terribly wrong. A bottle rocket shoots sideways, burning into his son's right eye. He is rushed to the emergency room.

In the years that follow, the boy endures painful eye procedures, but still cannot see well out of the injured and deformed eye. His dreams of playing Major League baseball are over, and he suffers from depression.

A day never passes that his parents aren't consumed by guilt about what happened.

Now imagine this incident playing out hundreds of times annually.

"This is an all-too-common story that happens every year in the United States," said Marguerite McDonald, MD, a clinical correspondent for the American Academy of Ophthalmology—an organization that issues annual fireworks safety warnings. "These tragedies can be avoided if families attend a professional public fireworks display, instead of putting on a home fireworks display."

According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, more than 9,000 fireworks-related injuries happen each year. Of these, nearly half are head-related injuries with nearly 30 percent of these injuries to the eyes. One-fourth of fireworks eye injuries result in permanent vision loss or blindness.

Illegal fireworks, including firecrackers, bottle rockets and Roman candles, account for the majority of injuries. Bottle rockets are the most dangerous because they fly erratically, causing bystander injuries.

The typical fireworks victim is young. Children 15 years old or younger account for 50 percent of fireworks eye injuries in the United States.

For children under the age of five, seemingly harmless sparklers account for one-third of all fireworks injuries. Sparklers can burn at nearly 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit.

"A sparkler's intense heat can burn not only skin, but also the eyes," said Dr. McDonald. "I've treated several children who suffered corneal burns from sparklers. This type of ocular injury can lead to corneal scars and permanent vision loss."

The Academy urges observance of the following safety tips:

- Never let children play with fireworks of any type.
- View fireworks from a safe distance: at least 500 feet away, or up to a quarter of a mile for best viewing.
- Respect safety barriers set up to allow pyrotechnicians to do their jobs safely.
- Leave the lighting of fireworks to trained professionals.
- Follow directives given by event ushers or public safety personnel.
- If you find unexploded fireworks remains, do not touch them. Immediately contact your local fire or police departments.

"Attending professional fireworks displays, instead of using fireworks at home, is a safe way to honor our tradition of independence and our hopes for a healthy future," Dr. McDonald said.

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About the American Academy of Ophthalmology

The American Academy of Ophthalmology is the world's largest association of eye physicians and surgeons—Eye M.D.s—with more than 27,000 members worldwide. Eye health care is provided by the three "O's" – opticians, optometrists and ophthalmologists. It is the ophthalmologist, or Eye M.D., who can treat it all: eye diseases and injuries, and perform eye surgery. To find an Eye M.D. in your area, visit the Academy's Web site at www.aao.org.