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Science Notes - Coalition Distributes Eclipse Safety Information

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Coalition Distributes Eclipse Safety Information

On May 10, 1994, North America will experience an annular eclipse of the sun. Because looking directly at the sun at any time can cause severe eye damage, including blindness, a coalition of ten eye care, safety and astronomy organizations has been formed to tell people everywhere how to avoid injuring their eyes during the eclipse.

A solar eclipse occurs when the moon passes between the Sun and the Earth. When the moon partly covers the Sun, people mistakenly assume that they can watch the eclipse with the naked eye, unaware that any rays from the part of the Sun still in view can painlessly burn the retinas of their eyes. These burns, known as solar retinopathy or retinal scarring, can result in severe and permanent vision loss. The scarring is irreversible and untreatable.

An annular eclipse occurs when the moon is too far away from the Earth to completely cover the surface of the Sun. The result is either a partial eclipse or a ring of Sun completely around the moon. Since the Sun's surface will not be completely covered at any time on May 10, it will not be safe to view this eclipse unprotected *at any time*.

The coalition's basic advice is, "Never look directly at the sun." Many misconceptions exist about safe ways of viewing the eclipse. The coalition stresses that sunglasses, most exposed film, most welders goggles, photographic filters and smoked glass are not suitable protection and must not be used for direct viewing. Similarly, normal binoculars and telescopes are totally unacceptable for direct eclipse watching because they concentrate the Sun's rays. Direct viewing should be done only under the guidance of a professionally sponsored "eclipse watch." The coalition also provides instructions for indirect viewing methods.

The coalition developed a packet of educational materials in 1991 and distributed them to science centers, planetariums, colleges and eye care professionals, who should still have them on hand. However, those who cannot obtain information from these sources are encouraged to contact the National Society to Prevent Blindness, 500 E. Remington Road, Schaumburg, IL 60173.