From major league stadiums to small-town fields to your own backyard, America’s favorite pastimes make great memories for many people. However, for more than 40,000 recreational and professional athletes (as well as a few unlucky spectators) each year, sports-related eye injuries ruin those memories. The majority of these victims are children and adults under the age of 30, many of whom suffer permanent vision loss. With a little advance planning, however, most of these injuries are preventable.

Athletes need protective eyewear because eye injuries can be devastating— not just career ending, but life changing. Unfortunately, some of these athletes end up with permanent vision loss or blindness. Eye injuries are also one of the leading causes of visual impairment in children, who can suffer anything ranging from corneal abrasions and bruised lids to internal eye injuries such as retinal detachments and internal bleeding.

Today, people can choose from a variety of lightweight and sturdy protective eyewear that looks great, feels good and serves a very practical purpose. Each sport requires its own type of protective eyewear. If possible, consumers should choose sports goggles with polycarbonate lenses, as these lenses are stronger, thinner and lighter in weight than traditional eyeglass lenses. Regular lenses are hard and unyielding, but polycarbonate lenses offer greater impact resistance, are flexible and can “give” slightly under pressure with less chance of breaking. Even if polycarbonate lenses come in contact with fast-moving objects, such as balls or racquets, they are resilient and usually will not break.

Both adults and children need to be aware of the seriousness of eye injuries, as well as how to prevent them using proper eye protection. Most sports do not require young athletes to wear eye protection, in spite of the fact that sports are the leading cause of eye injuries in children. “It’s up to parents to be sure their children wear eye protection every time they participate in a sport, and to also set a good example by wearing eye protection themselves whenever they play,” said Dr. Joseph Wende, Vice President, Professional Affairs at Davis Vision.

For young athletes, baseball and basketball account for the largest number of eye injuries. Little League pitchers, for instance, can throw a ball up to 70 mph, which is fast enough to break bones and injure eyes. In basketball, elbows get thrown and arms and hands flail around. While it’s impossible to control what body part gets hit, the only way to be sure to prevent serious eye injury is by wearing appropriate protective eyewear. Although they are responsible for the majority of sports-related eye injuries that occur, basketball and baseball are not the only sports that contribute to the thousands of eye injuries suffered each year. Football, hockey, soccer, tennis, golf and other contact sports can also cause serious harm to the eyes. “By wearing protective eyewear, you can prevent most sports-related eye injuries. Whatever you play, be sure to play safe and protect your eyes. Your eyes are a great investment for the future,” said Dr. Wende.

It is important to make an appointment with your eye doctor to get the appropriate eyewear protection for yourself and your family.