

Pickleball Boom Brings Unexpected Surge in Eye Trauma

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#)

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Pickleball's explosive growth has led to a surge in serious eye injuries, with emergency room cases increasing by 405 each year between 2021 and 2024
- Most eye injuries occur in players over 50, whose slower reflexes and vision changes make them more vulnerable to high-speed impacts and falls
- The sport's modern paddles can launch balls over 60 miles per hour at the kitchen line — just 14 feet apart — leaving players less than half a second to react
- Despite the sharp rise in injuries, there are still no universal safety rules requiring protective eyewear in recreational or professional play
- Wearing shatterproof glasses, warming up, and improving balance are simple steps that protect your eyesight and keep pickleball fun, safe, and injury-free

Pickleball's rapid rise from a quiet backyard hobby to one of the fastest-growing sports in the U.S. has brought more than just packed courts — it's exposed a blind spot in player safety. What started as a casual, low-impact game has become a national obsession, drawing players of every age and fitness level. Its appeal lies in its simplicity and social nature, offering movement and connection without the intensity of traditional racket sports.

But as more people take up paddles, the hidden risks are starting to surface. Eye injuries, once rare in recreational play, are now an emerging problem as the sport becomes faster, more competitive, and technologically advanced. Stronger paddles,

tighter court spacing, and aging participants have created a perfect storm for impact injuries that most players never expect.

If you've picked up pickleball for fun, fitness, or friendship, this issue affects you directly. A single moment of distraction — a deflected ball or an awkward stumble — quickly turns a lighthearted match into a medical emergency. Protecting your vision isn't about fear; it's about staying informed and proactive so you can keep enjoying the game safely for years to come.

To understand why these injuries are rising so sharply, researchers have started tracking the patterns, players, and conditions behind them — and what they've found should make every player think twice before stepping onto the court unprotected.

Pickleball's Popularity Surge Is Blinding Some Players

A cross-sectional study published in JAMA Ophthalmology examined nearly 20 years of emergency room data from hospitals across the U.S. to understand how often pickleball leads to serious eye trauma.¹ The researchers found an alarming trend: between 2021 and 2024, pickleball-related eye injuries increased by roughly 405 cases per year.

In total, an estimated 3,112 eye injuries occurred between 2005 and 2024, with 1,262 cases recorded in 2024 alone. That's a steep rise directly linked to the sport's explosive growth and its estimated 19.8 million U.S. players.

- **Older adults face the greatest risk of eye trauma** — The study revealed that 70% of all reported pickleball eye injuries occurred in players aged 50 and older. Researchers believe this is due to slower reflexes, reduced balance, and age-related vision changes that make it harder to react quickly to fast-moving balls.

Injuries ranged from mild corneal abrasions — scratches on the eye's surface — to severe trauma like hyphema (bleeding in the front chamber of the eye), orbital fractures (broken bones around the eye), and retinal detachment (when your retina

separates from the back of your eye). Any of these injuries can lead to partial or permanent vision loss if not treated immediately.

- **The speed and force of play have increased dramatically** — When a hollow, perforated plastic ball — only 26 grams in weight — is hit hard by a modern composite paddle, it often travels more than 60 miles per hour at close range. To put this in perspective, that's fast enough to deform your cornea and cause damage deep inside your eye.

According to the data, 43% of eye injuries were caused by direct ball impact, while 28% were from falls and 12% from accidental paddle hits. At the "kitchen line," the no-volley zone that separates players just 14 feet apart, reaction time is razor-thin — often less than half a second to respond to a fast-moving ball.

- **Modern paddles are unintentionally making the game more dangerous** — Advances in paddle technology — especially those using ethylene-vinyl acetate foam and high-tension carbon fiber — have increased rebound speed and reduced shock absorption. The result is a faster game with less reaction time, particularly in doubles play, where four players crowd a small court.

This creates a higher probability that a deflected or mishit ball will strike someone's face or eyes. The researchers suggested that as paddles become more powerful, safety equipment should evolve with them.

- **Emergency room data underestimates the true number of injuries** — The researchers cautioned that their findings likely represent only a fraction of the real number of cases. Their analysis drew exclusively from hospital emergency departments, meaning it excluded patients who went to urgent care centers, eye clinics, or primary care offices.

Many players with mild to moderate eye injuries — like minor abrasions or bruising — don't report them, so the national estimate of 3,112 likely undercounts the total number of incidents.

- **Severe injuries demand surgery and long recovery times** — A small but serious percentage of players suffered sight-threatening trauma. Retinal detachment requires immediate surgical intervention to reattach the retina and restore vision.

Hyphema, another common severe injury, involves bleeding inside the eye that raises internal pressure and risks permanent damage to the optic nerve. These injuries take months of recovery and cost thousands of dollars in follow-up care.

The Lack of Eye Protection Standards Leaves Players Exposed

Despite the sharp rise in injuries, there are still no universal rules requiring eye protection in casual or professional pickleball. The study emphasized that this lack of safety guidelines puts millions of players at risk.

The American Academy of Ophthalmology has urged the use of eyewear meeting ASTM F3164 standards — the same used in tennis and racquetball — to prevent serious injury. However, most recreational players are unaware of these recommendations, and USA Pickleball has yet to implement them at the tournament level.

- **Simple safety habits could prevent vision loss** — The authors recommended that players — especially those over 50 or with existing eye conditions — wear shatterproof eyewear, stretch before play, and avoid risky close-range volleys. They also suggested [strength and balance training](#) to reduce fall-related trauma. For those with [nearsightedness](#), [cataracts](#), or family history of retinal problems, eye protection is even more important.
- **Older adults aren't the only ones at risk** — Although most injuries occurred in those over 50, younger players were not immune. About 30% of reported cases occurred among players aged 30 to 59, and nearly 1 in 5 involved players under 30.

The researchers pointed out that younger players are often more aggressive, favoring fast volleys and hard shots, which increase impact speed. However, older players tended to have more severe outcomes because of age-related fragility in

eye tissues.

- **Awareness is the key to prevention** — What this study makes clear is that awareness saves sight. You might see pickleball as a lighthearted pastime, but the data show otherwise. A single accident could mean months of vision rehabilitation — or irreversible damage. As the sport continues to grow, knowing the risks gives you the power to protect your eyesight and keep playing safely.

How to Protect Your Eyes and Keep Pickleball Safe and Fun

Pickleball is supposed to be fun, not frightening. You play for connection, movement, and **Joy** — not a trip to the emergency room. Yet the data make it clear that without simple precautions, even a friendly match can end with serious eye damage. The good news is that most injuries are entirely preventable when you address the real causes: fast-moving balls, close court proximity, poor reaction time, and lack of protection. Here's how to stay in the game safely — without risking your eyesight.

1. **Invest in high-quality, shatterproof eyewear** — Protecting your eyes starts before you even pick up a paddle. Use eyewear that meets ASTM F3164 standards — the same protection recommended for tennis and racquetball players. Look for wraparound lenses made from materials that resist shattering on impact.

Regular sunglasses or prescription glasses aren't enough. Even a slow-moving pickleball can deform your cornea if it hits directly. Make wearing protective lenses a habit, just like tying your shoes before play.

2. **Warm up and train your balance before hitting the court** — Most players don't realize that many eye injuries happen after a stumble or misstep. Take a few minutes to **stretch** your calves, hips, and shoulders. If you're over 50, spend time on **balance exercises** — simple single-leg stands, heel-to-toe walks, or light agility drills.

Stronger stabilizing muscles mean fewer falls and less chance of hitting the ground or a paddle. You'll not only protect your eyes but improve your reaction time and game performance.

- 3. Mind your distance and positioning during rallies** — When you play doubles, it's easy to drift too close to your partner or stand inside the "kitchen" zone for too long. Give yourself space. Staying a few steps back reduces your exposure to high-speed shots traveling 60 mph or more.

If you tend to play close to the net, train yourself to block with your paddle instead of relying on reflexive head movement. Quick awareness drills — like bouncing the ball against a wall and reacting to its rebound — help retrain your eyes and brain to anticipate impacts faster.

- 4. Upgrade your gear as the game evolves** — Modern paddles generate far more power than those made even a few years ago. If you're using a carbon or foam-core paddle, consider one designed for control rather than maximum velocity.

A softer paddle face absorbs more energy, reducing rebound speed and lowering the risk of injury. Replace worn balls regularly too — old, cracked, or overused balls often ricochet unpredictably. Keeping your equipment in top condition protects both your eyes and your overall play experience.

- 5. Build eye health from the inside out** — [Protecting your vision](#) isn't just about defense — it's also about resilience. [Eye-protective nutrients](#) like vitamin A, [lutein](#), and [zeaxanthin](#) strengthen your retina and lens, helping your eyes recover from light and motion stress. You'll find these in foods like pastured egg yolks, grass fed beef liver, orange peppers, and leafy greens. Think of this as preventive maintenance for your vision — the same way you care for your joints or muscles.

Staying safe doesn't mean dulling the fun. By preparing your body, using the right gear, and protecting your vision, you'll play longer, stronger, and with greater confidence. Pickleball is meant to energize you, not injure you — and with a few smart adjustments, it will stay that way.

FAQs About Eye Injuries from Pickleball

Q: Why are pickleball eye injuries becoming more common?

A: Pickleball's explosive popularity means millions of new players are taking up the sport, often without proper eye protection. Modern paddles generate faster ball speeds — over 60 mph at close range — and older adults, who make up most players, have slower reaction times and weaker balance. Together, these factors have led to a sharp rise in eye injuries in recent years.

Q: Who is most at risk for pickleball-related eye injuries?

A: Players aged 50 and older face the highest risk due to age-related changes in balance, coordination, and vision. However, younger players are not immune. Those who play aggressively or stand too close to the net are also more likely to be struck in the face or eyes by a ball or paddle.

Q: What types of eye injuries are caused by pickleball?

A: Common injuries include corneal abrasions (surface scratches), hyphema (bleeding in the front of the eye), orbital fractures (broken bones around the eye), and retinal detachment (when your retina separates from the back of your eye). Even a single hit can cause lasting vision problems or require surgery if not treated right away.

Q: How can I prevent eye injuries while playing pickleball?

A: Wear shatterproof eyewear that meets ASTM F3164 safety standards — regular sunglasses or prescription glasses aren't strong enough. Strengthen your balance, warm up before play, and maintain distance from your partner during doubles. Keep your gear in good condition, and replace balls that are cracked or worn out.

Q: What's the most important takeaway for players?

A: Pickleball is meant to be fun and social, not dangerous. The biggest step you can take is prevention — wear protective eyewear, stay aware on the court, and respect how fast the game has become. Simple habits protect your vision for life and keep you playing safely for years to come.

Sources and References

- ¹ [JAMA Ophthalmology October 16, 2025](#)