

Sunscreens and Sun-Protective Clothing

Overexposure to the sun's invisible rays - ultraviolet A (UVA) and ultraviolet B (UVB) - can cause skin damage. The damage can be immediate and long-term, with effects ranging from sunburn, rashes, and cell and tissue damage to premature wrinkling and skin cancer. Indeed, many skin changes that often are identified with aging actually result from damage by too much sun.

Any tan is a sign of skin damage. Tanning occurs when the skin produces additional pigment (coloring) to protect itself against sunburn from ultraviolet rays. Indoor tanning devices also give off ultraviolet rays that can be as harmful as those from the sun.

To help reduce your risk of skin damage from sunlight, try to minimize your exposure to the sun between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m., when the sun's rays are strongest. Even casual exposure to sunlight - driving a car, walking to the store, taking an outdoor lunch break - contributes to cumulative lifetime exposure. If you're out during the peak hours, wear a hat and tightly-woven clothing that covers your body, and use maximum protection sunscreens.

It's important to understand the labeling information on sun protection products and shop carefully before heading to the beach, tennis court or park. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) carefully monitors advertising claims in this area and offers this information to help you make wise purchasing decisions.

True or False?

- Sunscreens labeled 15 and higher don't protect you against all the sun's rays.
- Suntans are a sign of skin damage.
- Sunscreens should be used on cloudy days.
- Infants shouldn't be in the sun at all.
- Some medications can make your skin sensitive to the sun.

(All are true.)

Sunscreens

Most people benefit from sunscreens with sun protection factor (SPF) numbers of 15 or more. The SPF number gives you some idea of how long you can stay in the sun without burning. For example, if you burn in 10 minutes without sunscreen and you apply a liberal dose with a SPF number of 15, you should be protected from sunburn for 150 minutes. Sunscreens with SPF numbers higher than 15 may work better for people who are fair-skinned, live at high altitudes, work or play outdoors much of the day, or perspire heavily. Swimming and perspiration reduce the actual SPF value of many sunscreens - even those that are water-resistant - so you have to reapply the product often.

Although sunscreens with identical SPF numbers give you equivalent sunburn protection from UVB rays, no sunscreen product screens out all UVA rays. Some may advertise UVA protection, but there is no system to rate UVA protection yet.

Many sunscreens - even those with the same SPF numbers - have different ingredients or different combinations of the same ingredients. Because some people experience allergic reactions to various sunscreen ingredients, it's a good idea to test a product first by applying a small amount to a limited area of your skin. To get the maximum protection from your sunscreen, apply at least one large handful about 30 minutes before you go outside, and reapply after swimming, toweling dry or participating in any vigorous activity that causes heavy perspiration.

If you're taking medication, ask your doctor or pharmacist if your medications will make your skin sensitive to the sun or aggravate sunburn or rashes. Certain antibiotics, birth control pills, diuretics, antihistamines, and antidepressants are among the commonly used drugs that can increase sensitivity to the sun's rays.

Sun-protective Clothing

Sun-protective clothing offers another way to protect skin from the harmful effects of the sun. Sun-protective fabrics differ from typical summer fabrics in several ways: they typically have a tighter weave or knit and are usually darker in color. Sun-protective clothes have a label listing the garment's Ultraviolet Protection Factor (UPF) value, that is, the level of protection the garment provides from the sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays. The higher the UPF, the higher the protection from the sun's UV rays.

The UPF rating indicates how much of the sun's UV radiation is absorbed by the fabric. For example, a fabric with a UPF rating of 20 only allows 1/20th of the sun's UV radiation to pass through it. This means that this fabric will reduce your skin's UV radiation exposure by 20 times where it's protected by the fabric.

Everything above UPF 50 may be labeled UPF 50+; however, these garments may not offer substantially more protection than those with a UPF of 50. Also, a garment shouldn't be labeled "sun-protective" or "UV-protective" if its UPF is less than 15. Sun-protective clothing may lose its effectiveness if it's too tight or stretched out, damp or wet, and if it has been washed or worn repeatedly.

Special Precautions for Children

Experts estimate that a significant percentage of our exposure to sun occurs by age 18. That's why it's especially important to apply sunscreens with a minimum SPF of 15 to children's skin about 30 minutes before they go outdoors. Reapply sunscreens after they swim, towel off or play hard. Talk with teachers, child care providers and camp counselors about scheduling outdoor activities to reduce children's exposure to the midday sun, when the sun's rays are most harmful.

Infants six months and younger should be kept out of direct sunlight altogether. Sunscreens may irritate baby skin, and infants' developing eyes are particularly vulnerable to sunlight.

For More Information

To learn more about skin cancer or skin damage, contact your family doctor, dermatologist, or:

Cancer Information Service (CIS)

1-800-4-CANCER
<http://cis.nci.nih.gov>

American Cancer Society (ACS)

1-800-ACS-2345
www.cancer.org

American Academy of Dermatology

P.O. Box 4014
Schaumburg, IL 60168-4014
www.aad.org

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