

# **SUNSCREEN & SKIN CANCER**

## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

### **Who needs to use sunscreen?**

Everyone!

The exception is babies younger than 6 months. Protect your baby by keeping him/her in the shade and using protective clothing such as wide-brimmed hats and light weight, long-sleeved shirts, and pants.



### **When should sunscreen be used?**

Sunscreen should be used on all exposed skin and every day, not just in the summer or at the beach. Even on a cloudy day, 80% of the sun's ultraviolet rays pass through the clouds.

### **What type of sunscreen is recommended?**

It's important to find a sunscreen that offers broad spectrum protection (protects against UVA and UVB rays). The American Academy of Dermatology recommends using an SPF of 30 or higher. Ideally, sunscreens should be water resistant, so they cannot be easily removed by sweating or swimming. The label on sunscreen claiming to be "water resistant" must list how long it will be effective before you need to reapply. New guidelines say that only broad spectrum sunscreen with at least an SPF of 15 can claim to prevent cancer.

## What are UV Rays?

Ultraviolet (UV) rays are a form of invisible energy given off by the sun. There are two types of harmful rays:

UVB rays are the sun's burning rays that damage the outer skin.

UVA rays penetrate deeper into the dermis, or base layer of the skin.

Sunburns are caused by UVB rays, but both UVA and UVB rays are associated with cataracts, cancers of the eye, skin cancer, and premature aging.

## What does SPF mean?

The SPF or Sun Protective Factor number estimates how many times longer, under ideal conditions, a person can stay in the sun without beginning to burn compared to the amount of time their unprotected skin would start to burn.

Higher numbers do mean more protection but, the higher you go, the smaller the difference becomes. SPF 15 sunscreens filter out about 93% of UVB rays, while SPF 30 sunscreens filter out about 97%, SPF 50 sunscreens about 98%.

## Does sunscreen expire?

Unless indicated by an expiration date, the FDA requires that all sunscreen be stable and at their original strength for at least three years. However, the shelf-life is shorter if it has been exposed to high temperatures.



## How should I apply and use sunscreen?

- Sunscreens should be applied evenly at least 15 minutes BEFORE going outdoors.
- Apply sunscreen before insect repellent or makeup.
- One ounce, a palm full, is needed to cover the exposed areas of the body properly.
- No sunscreen, regardless of strength, is expected to stay effective longer than two hours without reapplication. Apply more often when sweating or getting in and out of the water.
- Don't forget to apply a lip balm that contains sunscreen.

## Is sunscreen application all I need to do to be sun-safe?

The best sun protection is provided when all sun-safe behaviors are practiced together. In order to be sun-safe you should use broad-spectrum sunscreens with a minimum SPF of 30 as well as:

- Limit sun exposure between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. when the sun's rays are the strongest. A good rule to follow is if your shadow is shorter than you, stay in the shade.
- Use extra caution near water, snow, and sand since these surfaces reflect the rays of the sun and increase your chances of getting sunburned.
- Wear protective clothing, such as a long-sleeved shirt, pants, a wide-brimmed hat, and sunglasses with UVA and UVB protection.
- Get vitamin D safely through a healthy diet and vitamin supplements.

### **Are tanning beds a safer way to tan?**

No, because artificial UVA and UVB rays carry all the risks of natural sunlight. In fact, research shows that people who use indoor tanning before age 30 are 75% more likely to get melanoma than people who never tanned indoors.

Many health experts advise people to avoid sunlamps, tanning beds and booths, and the International Agency for Research on Cancer considers these devices "carcinogenic to humans".

## Is there a safe way to tan?

- No, a suntan is the skin's response to an injury. Every time you tan, you accumulate damage to the skin. This damage, in addition to accelerating the aging process, also increases your risk for all types of skin cancer.
- Base tanning to prepare for time spent in the sun is never advisable. It does not offer significant protection from future sunburns and contributes to all the negative effects of skin damage.
- If you desire a tanned appearance, use non-UV methods.

## What about sunless products?

Many sunless tanning products, such as bronzers and sunless tanners, are not thought to be harmful when used properly.

These products do not protect you from the damaging effects of UV radiation, so continue to use sunscreen and practice sun safety behaviors when outdoors.

## What risk factors are associated with skin cancer?

Exposure to UV rays (via the sun or indoor tanning).

Factors that can also affect your risk of damage from UV light include:

- Previous treatment for skin cancer, or a family history of skin cancer, especially melanoma.
- Living or vacationing at high altitudes or in tropical climates.
- Spend a lot of time outdoors (even if it is just on the weekends).
- Certain diseases, such as lupus, lymphoma, and HIV.
- Having had an organ transplant.
- Smoking.
- Any medication that may increase your sensitivity to sunlight.

Skin type is a factor in determining a person's risk for skin cancer. Some individual characteristics that are risk factors for skin cancer include:

- History of severe burns, many moles, freckles, fair skin, blue, green, or hazel eyes, redheads, blonds, or a tendency to burn rather than suntan.

No skin type is exempt from the serious health problems caused by the sun's UV rays. Even people with naturally darker skin are still at risk for skin cancer.

## Are there different types of skin cancer?

There are three major types of skin cancers: basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell, and melanoma.

- Basal cell is the most commonly diagnosed skin cancer. It usually appears on sun-exposed skin. Basal cell rarely results in death, and it does not usually spread to other parts of the body (metastasize), but it can grow to become highly disfiguring.
- Squamous cell is the second most common of skin cancers. It is aggressive, can metastasize, and may result in death. While most often found on sun-exposed skin, these types of cancer can be found anywhere on the body.
- Melanoma is rare, but incidence rates are increasing faster than any other cancer. Melanoma will metastasize throughout the body which makes it the most deadly skin cancer, causing approximately 75% of skin cancer deaths. However, when detected early, it is one of the most curable cancers.

## Why is it important to check my skin?

Checking your skin monthly means you are more likely to notice any changes. When skin cancers are detected early they can almost always be cured.

## What does skin cancer look like?

The appearance of skin cancer varies widely from person to person.

Look for any changes in your skin that last for two weeks or longer, any mark that is growing, changing shape, bleeding, or itching during a period of 1 month to 2 years.

Look for new or changing moles, they may have an unclear outline, color changes, or break open and heal repeatedly. Melanoma often looks like small mole-like growths.

- Pale, wax-like, pearly nodules.
- Red, scaly, sharply outlined patches.
- Sores that don't heal.

**If you find these skin changes, see a health care professional immediately.**



## How do I complete a skin self-check?

A self-exam is best done in a well-lit room in front of a full-length mirror and using a hand-held mirror for areas that are hard to see.

To thoroughly examine your skin:

### Face the mirror:

- Check your face, ears, neck, chest, and belly.
- Check the underarm areas, both sides of your arms, the tops and palms of your hands, between your fingers, and fingernail bed.

### Sit Down:

- Check the front of your thighs, shins, tops of your feet, between your toes, and the bed of your toenails.

### With the help of a hand mirror:

- Look at the bottoms of your feet, your calves, and the backs of your thighs.
- Check the buttocks, genital area, lower back, upper back, and the back of the neck.
- Part your hair so that you can check your scalp.

**Be sure to show your doctor any area that concerns you!**

## Where can I learn more about sun safety?

National Council on Skin Cancer Prevention

<http://www.skincancerprevention.org>

Shade Foundation of America

<http://www.shadefoundation.org>

Sun Safety for Kids

<http://www.sunsafetyforkids.org>

Sun Safety Alliance

<http://www.sunsafetyalliance.org>

SunWise Program

<http://www.epa.gov/sunwise>

## Sources

- American Academy of Dermatology
- American Cancer Society
- Federal Office of Safety and Health Administration
- Food and Drug Administration
- National Safety Council
- The Skin Cancer Foundation
- SkinCancerNet



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