Your Best Summer Skin – Sunscreen & Risk of Skin Cancer

Sunscreen protects skin from aging and can reduce your risk of skin cancer. Just as swimsuit styles and social attitudes toward swimming have changed over the decades, so has the sun. It's more intense these days due to a depleting ozone layer, and burning is something to contend with whenever outside, especially during summer. In 1980, an American's risk of getting melanoma in a lifetime was one in 250. In 1999, it was one in 74.

Each year, 1 million Americans--of all ages and ethnic origins--get skin cancer. Nine of 10 skin cancers develop on exposed areas, such as the face, ears, forearms, and hands, reports the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD). Skin cancer's most deadly form, melanoma, kills close to one American every hour, or 8,000 people a year. But these statistics don't mean you have to live like a monk. You can still read out on the deck and take the kids to the beach--if you first take time to safeguard your skin.

Sunscreen isn't optional. Only 53 percent of people polled in 1996 said they used sunscreen. Big mistake. Sunscreens work--despite what you may have read.

Controversy erupted after a prominent epidemiologist at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center reported that sunscreen did not protect skin against melanoma. News headlines confused many people, and the study was loudly criticized by dozens of dermatologists and the AAD. "That study was based on poor research," says Dr. Debra Jaliman, a clinical dermatology instructor at New York's Mount Sinai School of Medicine. "They asked people with skin cancer 20 years later if they had worn sunscreen. Do you think anyone remembers?" Also, she says, the study was done before broad-spectrum sunscreens or lotions with sun-protection factor (SPF) 15 and higher were readily available.

Sunscreen should be applied 15 to 30 minutes before you go out, even for a trip to the grocery store, says Dr. Ercem Atillasoy, a clinical assistant professor at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia. "If you use only one bottle of sunscreen a year, that's not enough," says Dr. Atillasoy. "During summer, you should use several bottles of sunscreen a month."

Slather an ounce--one-fourth the typical bottle or a jigger's worth--on your body. Reserve at least a teaspoonful for your face, neck, and oft-omitted earlobes. For the greatest potency, let the thick coating absorb, instead of rubbing it in. Reapply protection every two hours if you plan to stay outdoors. And if you'll sweat or swim, use a waterproof or slightly less-effective water-resistant block every time you towel off.

The safest way to protect your family is to shun the sun from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., when a person gets 80 percent of the day's dose of skin-crinkling ultraviolet rays, says Dr. Darrell S. Rigel, President of the AAD. But that's not realistic for most people, so when you are outside, wear protective lip balm; sunglasses; tightly-woven, light-colored clothes; and a sun-blocking hat with at least a four-inch brim. "For every inch of brim you add, you can lower your incidence of skin cancer by 10 percent," Dr. Rigel says. If you want to be super safe in the sun, wear a long-sleeved shirt and pants when you go out, and keep them dry. Dampened clothing is 40 percent less effective.

Butter up the kids. Frighteningly, 80 percent of lifelong sun damage occurs before age 18. Remind your kids to use sunscreen and wear a hat and sunglasses until the habit becomes as automatic as getting dressed. "If you start early, they'll accept it," says Dr. Roger I. Ceilley, immediate past president of the AAD and assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the University of Iowa. Dr. Ceilley recommends that sunscreen use start at 6 months old.

To help, enlist the aid of babysitters, camp counselors, and your kids themselves. "Make it a game," says Dr. Ella L. Toombs, dermatologist and spokesperson for the American Society for Dermatologic Surgery in Washington, D.C. "Challenge your kids to see how much sunscreen they can apply and if they can cover every area of their skin." The task can be easier thanks to some new products, such as Sea Critters Sun Block (4 oz., $9.75), which comes in a seahorse-shaped bottle and is scented with "giggleberry"; Bath & Body Works Kids' Bug-Repelling Sunblock (4 oz., $9), which fades from royal-blue to clear and is scented "chuckleberry"; and Coppertone Kids Colorblock Disappearing Colored Sunblock Lotion (8 oz., $9.49), which comes out of the bottle purple or blue before disappearing.

Don't feel defeated if you got a lot of sun exposure as a child. Many adults feel that past actions have blown any chances of ever having healthy skin. Actually, it's never too late to change your habits--and some damage will fade with time. "It's like cigarette smoking," says Dr. Rigel, clinical professor of dermatology at New York University School of Medicine in New York City. " No matter how much you've smoked, it always pays to stop."

Be SPF savvy. Use a sunscreen or sunblock with an SPF of at least 15 or higher. The number indicates how many times longer you could remain in the sun without getting sunburned than if you were unprotected. For instance, if ordinarily your skin burns after 10 minutes, then theoretically an SPF 15 would delay the burning for 150 minutes. That sounds impressive, but don't be fooled by a blazing sun, says Dr. James Leyden, dermatology professor at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine in Philadelphia. He recommends using an SPF 30 every day, but upgrading to an SPF 45 when outdoors for more than an hour.

"SPF 15 is not enough," Dr. Leyden says. "It may protect you against redness, but if you biopsy the skin, you can see clear-cut evidence of injury to the cells. This means damage can occur without the skin naming red." As important as SPF is the range of the sunscreen. Much like a radio, the sun sends out two different frequencies that damage skin: ultraviolet A and ultraviolet B rays. UV-A rays penetrate deeper into the skin and are blamed for aging, spotting, and crinkling. The shorter UV-B rays bum and blister your skin's outer layers. Either length can lead to skin cancer.

That's why you need a "broad spectrum" sunscreen or sunblock that blocks all frequencies, says Dr. Vincent DeLeo, dermatology chairman at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center in New York City. Any one of four ingredients--oxybenzone, titanium dioxide, zinc oxide, or avobenzone (also known as Parsol 1789)--will provide that power. Most of these ingredients are newcomers to the beach, spawning a slew of products beginning last year. You'll find Parsol 1789, which chemically reacts with the skin to weaken damaging rays, in products by Avon, Ombrelle, Lancome, Coppertone, and Presun. Zinc oxide and titanium dioxide--a chemical that deflects rays from the body--are found in Clinique City Block, Oil of Olay, Neutrogena, Estee Lauder, Origins, Clarins, and UV Defense lotions, among others.

The best is yet to come as, within the next several years, products containing Mexoryl are released. Dr. Leyden says Mexoryl in combination with Parsol 1789 offers the best UV-A protection. Until its federal approval, Mexoryl is available only in Europe and South America.

Don't forget, either, to consider your skin type in choosing a formula. Those who are acne-prone should avoid oil-based products and veer toward lighter, alcohol-based gels. Those with dry skin should seek creamier versions. Those prone to allergic breakouts should look for hypoallergenic, noncomedogenic formulas free of PABA, fragrances, and benzophenone.

Getting buggy with it. If you're bugged by insects, you're best off using a sunscreen that already contains repellent, such as Coppertone Bug & Sun Sunscreen Lotion (8 oz., $9.50) and Bath & Body Works Bug-Repelling Sunscreen (4 oz., $9). Insect repellents that are DEET-based weaken the potency of sunscreen by about 30 percent, according to a study by the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research in Washington, D.C. The active ingredient in DEET dissolves the active ingredients found in most sunscreen products. Bug spray isn't the only sun saboteur. Alpha-hydroxy acid skin creams make your skin up to 50 percent more sensitive to sunlight, according to Food and Drug Administration studies.

Certain drugs also make you more vulnerable to the sun, such as antihistamines, diuretics, tranquilizers, antifungals, antibiotics (including tetracyclines, sulfa, and quinolones), nonsteroidal anti-inflammatories, and drugs that lower blood sugar, Dr. Ceilley says. The same applies to bergamot, an ingredient in some fragrances, as well as mangoes, celery, fennel, figs, parsnip, and lime rinds.

Self-tanning lotions generally provide sun protection of an SPF 2 or 3 depending on the depth of color produced. The active ingredient--dihydroxyacetone, or DHA--produces brown skin pigment, and the DHA isn't affected by sweating, swimming, and showering, according to John A. Johnson, Ph.D., dermatology professor emeritus at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha. Coverage from self-tanning lotions is particularly effective in blocking UV-A rays. Some self-tanners that are more natural-looking include Clarins Self Tanning Milk (4.4 oz., $22) and Avon Sunless Tanning Cream (4.2 oz., $9.50). As Johnson says, echoing dermatologists everywhere, "Skin damage is cumulative, so anything you can do to cut it down helps."

THE TRUTH ABOUT TANNING MYTHS:

MYTH: If you combine an SPF 8 sunscreen with another of $PF 15, you get an SPF 23.
FACT: You'll end up with the average--about an SPF 11--not the total of the values.
MYTH: A tan protects your skin against melanoma.
FACT: A tan signals skin damage, which can lead to skin cancer.
MYTH: The difference between a sunscreen and sunblock is that the sunblock has an SPF below 15 and sunscreen above 15.
FACT: Sunscreens use chemicals to absorb and dissipate rays, whereas sunblocks provide a barrier causing the rays to bounce off your skin.
MYTH: Lower SPF sunscreens block burning rays, but not tanning ones.
FACT: You can't separate the rays.
MYTH: You won't ever tan with a sunscreen.
FACT: Sun protection only delays a person from getting color and skin damage.

MYTH: The sun's damaging rays can't penetrate glass, so you're safe indoors.
FACT: While burning UV-B rays can't pierce glass, UV-A rays do. So slather up if you sit near a window or spend much of the day in a car.
MYTH: You can get rid of acne by tanning.
FACT: The color you get from the sun briefly dries out skin and makes the redness of blemishes less obvious. But spats will reappear-and you'll wrinkle faster too.