

# Protecting Your Skin From the Sun

## Table of Contents

- Topic Overview
  - Credits
  - Appendix
    - Skin Cancer: Protecting Your Skin
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## Topic Overview

### Protecting your skin

Most skin cancer can be prevented. Use the following tips to protect your skin from the sun. You may decrease your chances of developing skin cancer and help prevent wrinkles.

Although people with darker skin don't sunburn as easily, they can still get skin cancer. So it's important to use sun protection, no matter what your skin color is.

### Avoid sun exposure

The best way to prevent a sunburn is to avoid sun exposure.

Stay out of the midday sun (from 10 in the morning to 4 in the afternoon), which is the strongest sunlight. Find shade if you need to be outdoors. You can also calculate how much ultraviolet (UV) exposure you are getting by using the shadow rule: A shadow that is longer than you are means UV exposure is low; a shadow that is shorter than you are means the UV exposure is high.

Other ways to protect yourself from the sun include wearing protective clothing, such as:

- Hats with wide 4 in. (10 cm) brims that cover your neck, ears, eyes, and scalp.
- Sunglasses with UV ray protection, to prevent eye damage.
- Loose-fitting, tightly woven clothing that covers your arms and legs.
- Clothing made with sun protective fabric. These clothes have a special label that tells you how effective they are in protecting your skin from ultraviolet rays.

## Preventing sun exposure in children

You should start protecting your child from the sun when he or she is a baby. Because children spend a lot of time outdoors playing, they get most of their lifetime sun exposure in their first 18 years.

- It's safest to keep babies younger than 6 months out of the sun.
- Teach children the ABCs of how to protect their skin from getting sunburned.
  - **A = Away.** Stay away from the sun as much as possible from 10 in the morning until 4 in the afternoon. Find shade if you need to be outdoors.
  - **B = Block.** Use a sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 30 or higher to protect babies' and children's very sensitive skin.
  - **C = Cover up.** Wear clothing that covers the skin, hats with wide brims, and sunglasses with UV protection. Even children 1 year old should wear sunglasses with UV protection.

## Sunscreen protection

If you can't avoid being in the sun, use a sunscreen to help protect your skin while you are in the sun.

Be sure to read the information on the sunscreen label about its SPF value and how much protection it gives your skin. Follow the directions on the label for applying the sunscreen so it is most effective in protecting your skin from the sun's ultraviolet rays.

## Choosing a sunscreen

- Sunscreens come in lotions, gels, creams, ointments, and sprays. Use a sunscreen that:
  - Has a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 30 or higher.
  - Says "broad-spectrum" that protects the skin from ultraviolet A and B (UVA and UVB) rays.
- Use lip balm or cream that has SPF of 30 or higher to protect your lips from getting sunburned.
- Take extra care to protect your skin when you're near water, at higher elevations, or in tropical climates.

Sunscreens labeled "water-resistant" are made to protect people while they are swimming or sweating. The label will say if the sunscreen will protect you for 40 minutes or 80 minutes.

## Applying a sunscreen

- Apply the sunscreen at least 15 to 30 minutes before going in the sun.
- Apply sunscreen to all the skin that will be exposed to the sun, including the nose, ears, neck, scalp, and lips. Sunscreen needs to be applied evenly over the skin and in the amount recommended on the label. Most sunscreens are not completely effective because they are not applied correctly. It usually takes about 1 fl oz (30 mL) to cover an adult's body.
- Apply sunscreen every 2 to 3 hours while in the sun and after swimming or sweating a lot. The SPF value decreases if a person sweats heavily or is in water, because water on the skin reduces the amount of protection the sunscreen provides.

## Other sunscreen tips

The following tips about sunscreen will help you use it more effectively:

- If your skin is sensitive to skin products or you have had a skin reaction (allergic reaction) to a sunscreen, use a sunscreen that is free of chemicals, para-aminobenzoic acid (PABA), preservatives, perfumes, and alcohol.
- If you are going to have high exposure to the sun, consider using a physical sunscreen, such as zinc oxide, which will stop most of the sunlight from reaching the skin.
- If you need to use sunscreen and insect repellent with DEET, do not use a product that combines the two. You can apply sunscreen first and then apply the insect repellent with DEET, but the sunscreen needs to be reapplied every 2 hours.

Do not use tanning booths to get a tan. Artificial tanning devices can cause skin damage and increase the risk of skin cancer. If you want your skin to look tan, try a sunless tanning cream or spray that makes your skin look tan. And keep using sunscreen when you are in the sun.

For information on sun exposure and vitamin D, see [Getting Enough Calcium and Vitamin D](#).

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## Credits for Protecting Your Skin From the Sun

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## Appendix

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### Introduction

Excessive exposure to the sun and its ultraviolet (UV) rays can cause skin cancer. You can reduce your risk for skin cancer by:

- Protecting your skin, and that of your family members, from UV radiation.
- Performing frequent skin self-examinations .
- Finding out whether you have an increased risk for melanoma and other skin cancers.

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### How do I protect my skin from UV radiation and skin cancer?

You can take steps to protect your skin from UV radiation. While sunscreen plays a vital role in protecting your skin from UV radiation, it can't prevent skin damage if you are exposed to the sun's rays for long periods of time. Experts recommend that you use multiple methods to fully protect your skin.

Preventing skin cancer isn't always possible. But being alert for new spots or skin growths and having your doctor check your skin regularly may help find skin cancer early when it can be more easily treated.

## **Protect your skin**

- Stay out of the sun during the peak hours of UV radiation, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
- Wear protective clothing:
  - Wide-brimmed hats that protect the face and neck
  - Tightly-woven clothing made of thick material, such as unbleached cotton, polyester, wool, or silk
  - Dark clothing with dyes added that help absorb UV radiation
  - Loose-fitting long-sleeved clothing that covers as much of the skin as possible
  - Clothing that has sun protection factor (SPF) in the fabric that does not wash out
- Wear sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher, summer and winter, on both cloudy and clear days.
- Apply sunscreen that blocks both UVA and UVB radiation to all exposed skin, including lips, ears, back of the hands, and neck. Apply sunscreen 30 minutes before going in the sun, and reapply it every 2 hours and after swimming, exercising, or sweating.
- Wear wraparound sunglasses that block at least 99% of UVA and UVB radiation.
- Be careful when you are on sand, snow, or water, because these surfaces can reflect 85% of the sun's rays.
- Avoid artificial sources of UVA radiation, including sunlamps and tanning booths. Like the sun, they can cause skin damage and increase the risk of skin cancer.

A child's skin is more sensitive to the sun than an adult's skin and is more easily burned. Babies younger than 6 months should always be completely shielded from the sun. Children 6 months and older should have their skin protected from too much sun exposure.

## **Know the ABCDEs of early detection**

Skin cancer can be cured if found and treated early. If it is not discovered or treated until too late, it can spread throughout the body and may be fatal. Skin cancer often appears on the trunk of men and on the legs of women. Learn your ABCDEs, the changes in a mole or skin growth that are warning signs of melanoma:

- **Asymmetry** : One half doesn't match the other half.
- **Border irregularity** : The edges are ragged, notched, or blurred.
- **Color** : The pigmentation is not uniform. Shades of tan, brown, and black are present. Dashes of red, white, and blue add to the mottled appearance. Color may spread from the edge of a mole into the surrounding skin.
- **Diameter** : The size of the mole is greater than 6 mm (0.2 in.), or about the size of a pencil eraser.
- **Evolution** : There is a change in the size, shape, symptoms (such as itching or tenderness), surface (especially bleeding), or color of a mole.

## Get to know your skin

Skin cancer, including melanoma, is curable if spotted early. A careful skin exam may identify suspicious growths that may be cancer or growths that may develop into skin cancer (precancers).

- Examine your skin once every month. Get to know your moles and birthmarks. And look for any abnormal skin growth and any change in the color, shape, size, or appearance of a skin growth.
- Check for any area of skin that does not heal after an injury.
- Have your doctor check your skin during any other health exams. Most experts recommend having your skin examined regularly.
- Bring any suspicious skin growths or changes in a mole to the attention of your doctor.

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## Credits for Skin Cancer: Protecting Your Skin

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Note: The "printer friendly" document will not contain all the information available in the online document. Some information (e.g. cross-references to other topics, definitions or medical illustrations) is only available in the online version.

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