

Learn How to Protect Your Skin at Any Age!

By Kateri DeLaney, R.N.

Summer is finally here! Parents and kids alike are slipping into shorts and tee shirts, basking in the warm air and sunshine. And many of us are spending summer vacations at the beach, enjoying long days in the sand and sea.

But how do we protect our skin – and that of our children - while still enjoying the sun? A few precautions can help to avoid sunburn as well as the long-term affects of sun exposure.

Most of us generally know about sunscreen, and are familiar with the abbreviation “SPF”, which stands for “Sun Protection Factor.” The SPF is a necessary ingredient in any sunscreen product, but did you know it only protects against only one segment of ultraviolet radiation, UVB?

UVB vs. UVA

UVB rays are the ultra violet rays that are responsible for browning and burning our skin. As we age, UVB rays also cause the unsightly spots on sun-exposed areas that are commonly known as “liver spots.” Many of us feel protected when we slather on a product with a high SPF number. However, the reality is that SPF 15 filters out approximately 94% of UVB rays. Even if you double that factor, say to SPF 30, you only get three to four percent more protection!

Here’s another important fact: UVB rays only make up about five percent of the ultraviolet radiation that reaches the earth.

UVA rays, on the other hand, make up more than 90 percent of the ultraviolet radiation we’re exposed to, and they are the real culprit in the aging process—starting when we’re youngsters. And most importantly, the SPF in sunscreens does not protect us from the UVA rays!

To complicate matters, UVA has both short and long rays, each of which requires screening. UVA rays change very little from season to season, and penetrate clouds and windows! Look at the left side of your face very carefully. Most of us look older on the left side than on the right side because that UVA light passes right through the car window every single time we drive, doing its level best to wreck our skin.

Worse than the cosmetic havoc of sun exposure, however, is the skin cancers it causes. Skin cancers are on the rise in the United States, and like all cancers, the best way to manage them is through prevention and early detection.

Proper sun screen is essential to prevention and should be applied 365 days a year as part of your regular health routine. When selecting a sun screen, look at

the label. The Skin Cancer Foundation logo on over-the-counter products is a great indicator that you are making the right choice. If you purchase your sunscreen at a physician's office, ask your provider to review the ingredients with you and explain where in the UV spectrum they work.

There is a newly-approved product on the market that is available only in select medical offices called Anthelios SX. This protects against UVB rays and both the long UVA rays and the short UVA rays. This product can be used on both children and adults.

The American Academy of Dermatology, AAD, recommends that infants under six months of age be kept out of direct sun and covered by protective clothing. Apply sunscreen beginning at six months of age. Children under six months of age should not have prolonged sun exposure but if this does occur, then sunscreen should be used, says the AAD.

Finally, use clothing for sun protection. Wear a hat and light colored clothing; tightly woven clothes not only reflect heat, but help you feel cool. Put on a shirt and hat after swimming, and even have your child wear a tee-shirt while swimming. And don't forget the sunglasses, which block ultraviolet rays and protect the eyes and eyelids.

Sidebar: The Do's and Don'ts of Protecting Skin at All Ages:

DO

1. Wear a sunscreen that has both a high level of protections against UVA rays and at least an SPF of 15 for UVB rays.
2. Use sun protection daily, even if it is cold or cloudy outside.
3. As an adult, visit your dermatologist for an annual check-up and notify your doctor if you notice a change or discoloration in a mole, as that can be an early sign of skin cancer.
4. The American Academy of Dermatology, AAD, recommends that children stay away from the midday sun and its intense rays. Schedule play times and outdoor activities before 9:00 a.m. and after 3:00 p.m. (daylight savings time). Remember that the sun's damaging effects are increased by reflection from water, white sand, and snow.
5. Another tip from the AAD is for kids to sit or play in the shade, especially when their shadow is shorter than they are tall.

DON'T

1. Forget to apply sunscreen to areas such as hands, neck, chest and ears.
2. Scrimp when applying sunscreen; most people don't use enough! Apply 30 minutes before sun exposure.
3. Forget that SPF measures protection against UVB rays only, not UVA rays. Look for ingredients that offer UVA protections as well.

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