

SUN PROTECTION

By Julianne Hale

Common Misconceptions & the Truth about Skin Cancer

"I know I should use sunscreen, but..."
"I just need one good burn to get a tan."
"I'm so pale, I don't care what the risks are!"
"It's the sun, not a tanning bed. What's the harm?"

The hard truth is that when it comes to melanoma — the most deadly type of skin cancer — as many as 86% of cases can be traced back to ultraviolet radiation exposure from the sun.

Contrary to popular belief, this does not only apply to the fair skinned among us. Skin cancer can affect anyone, regardless of age or skin color. Each year, there are more new cases of skin cancer than the combined incidence of cancers of the breast, prostate, lung and colon. That is why it is critical that everyone should take steps to protect themselves from the harmful UV rays of the sun, every single day of the year.

Unfortunately, sunscreen is something that many people get wrong. They use too much, too little, the wrong SPF or fail to reapply. Here are 10 common mistakes that people make when it comes to sunscreen along with tips to help you protect yourself and your family.



Applying Mistakes...

- 1 Waiting too long.** Most of us wait until we are on the beach or at the pool to begin slathering or spraying. Bad idea. Damage to the skin can occur in only 15 minutes and it can take up to 20 minutes for sunscreen to take effect. Always apply sunscreen to the skin 20 minutes before sun exposure.
- 2 Thinking you're covered.** In order to get adequate coverage from sunscreen, apply a minimum of one ounce—about the amount it takes to fill a shot glass—to all exposed parts of the body. A spray should be used for 60-90 seconds, enough to make the skin visibly shiny.
- 3 Slathering and swimming.** Many of us slather ourselves in sunscreen and assume we are protected for hours or even an entire day. Not true! Sunscreen should be reapplied every two hours and more often if swimming or sweating. There is no such thing as water-proof sunscreen.
- 4 Missing the mark.** Slathering copious amounts of sunscreen to the face, arms, shoulders and legs is wonderful but make sure not to miss the lips, scalp and between the toes—three commonly overlooked spots susceptible to skin cancer.



Misconceptions...

- 5 "My makeup covers me."** Using a foundation or powder that contains SPF is a great thing but it won't provide adequate protection from the sun. Make sure to supplement that makeup with a hat or additional SPF when spending time outdoors.
- 6 "Vitamin D is good for me!"** Yes, vitamin D is good for you but is it worth an increased cancer risk? Vitamin D supplements are inexpensive and available at any department store or pharmacy. Get some, take them daily and use sunscreen to protect your skin from UV rays.



Good Intentions, But...

- 7 Wrong SPF.** A good rule of thumb is to buy a minimum of SPF 30. Anything less is not effective. Anything above 30 is only marginally more effective.
- 8 Missing label.** Pay attention to labels and make sure the sunscreen bottle says "Broad Spectrum." This means that it provides protection from UVA and UVB rays. Also check for the water-resistant rating, which aids in choosing proper protection for water activities.
- 9 Expired bottle.** Contrary to popular belief, sunscreen does become less effective with age and those expiration dates are important. If your sunscreen is expired, toss it. Begin each summer with a new batch of sun protection.
- 10 Pharmacy fail.** Certain prescription drugs can increase your sun sensitivity. Check with your pharmacist or doctor to make sure you aren't taking any of these, and if you are, make sure to take extra precautions—wear protective sun wear, apply more frequently, and use a high SPF.

Protect Your Skin from the Summer Sun

BY CARA HENNINGS, M.D.

Children and adults with fair skin, blue eyes, and red or blond hair know the feeling all too well – that burning, stinging sensation to the areas of skin that have been exposed to the sun for too long without any protection.

Sunburn occurs when exposure to the sun exceeds the ability of the body's protective pigment, melanin, to protect the skin. Although fair-skinned individuals are especially vulnerable to sunburn, no one is exempt from the sting of the summer sun.

Along with the typical skin symptoms of redness, swelling, pain, and blisters, you may also have fever, chills, and weakness. Several days after the burn, your skin may itch and peel. Long-term consequences of sunburn include accelerated aging or wrinkling of the skin and an increased risk of skin cancers.

One of the biggest known risk factors for getting skin cancer is excess exposure to ultraviolet (UV) light. UV light increases the



risk of skin cancer. The older you are, the more likely you are to be diagnosed with skin cancer, particularly after age 50. However, increased sun exposure and sun damage at an early age is a major contributor to skin cancer later in life. More than 1 million people are diagnosed with skin cancer every year.

One of the best ways to protect against skin cancer is to simply limit exposure to harmful UV light. These rays can be just as damaging on a cloudy, overcast day as on a bright and sunny day, so use sunscreen and other protective measures daily. Taking certain medications such as sulfa drugs, tetracycline, and some diuretics also increases the risk of sunburn. Tanning beds are also damaging to the skin, much like smoking damages the lungs. UVA-1 is the main ultraviolet ray used in tanning beds and causes deep skin damage that puts people at risk for developing melanoma.

Not many cases of sunburn require medical attention, but there are a number of ways you can relieve the symptoms for you or your children:

- Avoid repeated exposure to the sun until the burn heals.
- Take a cool bath or use cool compresses on the sunburned area.
- Take acetaminophen or ibuprofen for discomfort. Never give aspirin to children. Aspirin can increase a child's risk of getting Reye's syndrome.
- Apply a topical moisturizer, aloe gel, hydrocortisone cream, or a topical pain reliever to the sunburned area. Avoid commercial products that contain benzocaine or Benadryl because of the possibility of skin irritation or allergy.
- To avoid infection, do not break blisters.

Call your physician if the sunburn causes severe pain or widespread blistering, or if symptoms of heat stress occur, such as fever, chills, nausea, vomiting, or feeling faint.

To prevent sunburn, follow the ABC's of sunburn prevention, as recommended by the American Academy of Dermatology:

- **A**void sun exposure during the peak intensity hours of 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. The risk of burning increases at higher altitudes.
- **B**lock the sun's rays using sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15. Sunscreens with an SPF of 30 or higher will provide the most protection. Reapply every two hours, or after swimming or sweating. Do not use sunscreen on infants under 6 months of age.
- **C**over up with protective clothing, such as long sleeve shirts and hats, with a tight weave that keeps out as much sunlight as possible.

Also be sure to keep babies under 6 months of age away from direct sunlight. Move your baby to the shade or under a tree, an umbrella, or a stroller canopy.

Cara Hennings, M.D., dermatologist, sees both adult and pediatric patients at UT Erlanger Dermatology, located in the Erlanger Medical Mall at 979 East Third Street. To make an appointment with Dr. Hennings, call (423) 778-5693.



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