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Sun Protection for Children

Sun damage in childhood is one of the most important causes of skin cancer in adults. Not only is children's skin more vulnerable to damage by the sun's rays, but people on average get 80% of our lifetime sun exposure by age 14. Bad sunburns in childhood risk the later development of malignant melanoma (the most dangerous type of skin cancer). Skin cancer is caused by ultraviolet light from the sun.

Regular skin cancers, which are usually not dangerous, are from long term, regular sun exposure. The dangerous form of skin cancer, Melanoma, comes from occasional overexposure to the sun. People who work or play outdoors and overexpose themselves to the sun will develop wrinkled, freckled dry skin and eventually skin cancers. People who vacation at the shore, or lay out on weekends will risk melanoma.

A tan is the body's defense against sun damage. A dark tan means a more effective defense. But if you have to work at your tan, or burn first, then tan, you do not have a strong defense against skin cancer. We now know that sunscreens do not completely protect you from getting melanoma if you use them to go out in the sun longer. If your children do not easily and quickly darken, you should avoid excess sun.

The following simple tips will help to enable your child to enjoy the summer safely:

Keep children out of the sun when it is most intense- between 11 am and 3 pm. If you care for young children you should make every effort to schedule their outdoor activities to avoid this time of day.

Make maximum use of shade. The Australians have learned the value of shade and have run campaigns to plant trees in school playgrounds. Children must wear hats outdoors. Such measures should be started in the U.S.

Dress your children in long sleeves and pants whenever possible. Tightly woven fabric that you can't see through easily offers the best sun protection. Oversized T-shirts are OK. Avoid skimpy clothes sundresses and sleeveless T-shirts that leave the most vulnerable areas like the shoulders exposed. The shoulders and back of the neck receive a good deal of sun exposure when children are playing and this is an area for severe sunburn. Special, sun protective clothing is made by the Solumbra Company.

A hat with a wide brim that shades the face and preferably the back and sides of the head should also be worn. A sun hat is ideal, but a baseball cap can also provide useful protection.

Cover exposed parts of your child's skin with moderately strong sunscreen of SPF 30. It should have UVA and UVB screens in it. Waterproof sunscreens should be used for sports and swimming. A waxy sunblock stick can be used around the eyes to keep the sunscreen from burning when they sweat-Clinique makes one, and Durascreen lipstick can also be used. Parts of the body which need extra protection are the nose, cheeks, shoulder tops and feet. Eyes can also be damaged by excessive sun exposure and should be protected. Sunglasses should have a UV (ultra violet) coating.

The labels of sunscreens recommend it not be used on children under 6 months. That is not because there is a known harm to young children, but rather the products have not been tested on infants.