

Sunscreens and Tanning

Sunscreens have improved so much in recent years that the single most important factor in picking a sunscreen is to put it on regularly. Obviously, it will be suggested that all fair skinned and sun sensitive people use sunscreen regularly. Sunscreens are rated by the SPF number (sun protection factor). This number tells you how many times longer you can stay out in the sun without burning if you use it. So, a SPF of 15 means if you can only stay out in the sun one half to one hour normally, you can spend the whole day outside if you use it (approximately 7 to 14 hours). Higher SPF sunscreens only take out about an additional 3 or 4 percent of the sunlight and may be more irritating. So higher numbers really are better, but once you get past fifteen the difference is not very remarkable.

It is important to screen out not only the burning rays (called UVB), but also the so-called “tanning rays” (UVA). We used to think that UVA was safe, but we now know that it is the major factor in premature aging of the skin, as well as causing skin cancer. So for daily use, to prevent skin cancer, skin aging and wrinkling you need a sunscreen with a SPF of 15 or more, that is not irritating and also blocks UVA light.

Some of the more preferred brands of sunscreen are “Presun Ultra” which comes as a SPF 30 cream or a gel, Ombrelle, which is either an SPF 15 or 30 lotion, and Neutrogena products with helioplex. Other acceptable sunscreens include any opaque foundation (solid color) or make up with a SPF of 15, and Johnsons Baby sunblock for young children. Coppertone’s Water babies is well accepted by older children and fine for a day at the beach.

There are sunscreens that serve particular purposes well. Durascreen and Shade sport gel sunscreens are water resistant and good for outdoor sports. Durascreen also comes as a lipstick like stick, good around the eyes to avoid stinging.

Topix sunscreen pads and Walmart generic wipes are waterproof SPF 30 pads that come in a plastic container and are good for women with wiggling kids.

There is a controversy in the news that sunscreen may not prevent skin cancer. While not proven, this may be partly true if too little sunscreen is used or it is inconsistently or inadequately applied. Low SPF sunscreens may block out the burning rays that would have given you a sunburn and warned you to get out of the sun. The end result is that people are using sunblock to stay out much longer and collect more damaging rays.

There is little doubt however, that properly used, sunscreens work. In Australia where strict sun protection has been widely used to stem their epidemic of melanoma, their rate of melanoma has started to fall while ours keeps rising. Consistent, regular use is the key to preventing skin cancer. It has been shown that occasional overexposures to the sun are what brings on skin cancer.

Most people don't know how to properly use sunscreen. First and foremost, it should be applied everywhere your skin is going to be exposed to the sun, not just the tops of your ears and your nose! If you have chosen a waterproof sunscreen because you are going to be sweating or going in the water, it is very important to apply this to cool, dry skin at least thirty minutes before sun exposure, sweating, or going in the water. It is important to use enough sunscreen. It takes one ounce (30 cc's) to cover the average person head to toe. If you apply too thin a layer of sunscreen it does not work. This is why some people can apply a SPF of fifteen or twenty and still get sunburn. They simply used too little and spread it too thinly. Take a look at how many ounces are in that bottle of sunscreen you bought, and figure how much to use accordingly. It is also important to reapply your sunscreen after being in the water for an extended time or vigorous physical activity that results in profuse sweating.

Clothing is also very helpful. A hat and a shirt give an additional layer of protection. Ordinary clothing alone may not be enough though a t-shirt has SPF 7 and Stockings/nylons are SPF 2. Overall, thick fabrics are better and dyes help, better than whites.

Tanning beds expose our bodies to ultraviolet A (UVA), the so-called tanning rays. Tanning beds are less likely to cause skin cancer than lying out in the natural sun, but they are not completely safe by any means. First of all, the tanning lights are not pure UVA. 5% of the output of a tanning light is UVB. Secondly, UVA light penetrates the skin deeper than the shorter UVB or "burning rays. This results in premature aging including wrinkling, a leathery appearance to the skin, and brown spots. Even more importantly, UVA is a major cause of all types of skin cancer especially squamous cell carcinoma. We don't know yet how bad it is for malignant melanoma, which is the most deadly form of skin cancer. So cover up, use your sunscreen, and avoid tanning beds. For color, use sunless tanning lotions along with sunscreen.