

Want A Safe Tan?

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Living Well

A column from SVNA by Cyd Emmons

There was a time when ladies wouldn't dream of going outside without a big hat and carried a parasol throughout the summer to preserve their milky white complexions. Those Victorian ladies had the right idea.

In the mid 20th century the fashion for pale skin gave way to the continual quest for the perfect tan. Ever since, the incidence of skin cancer has steadily climbed. Today more than 1 million skin cancers are diagnosed in the U.S. each year. It's now the most common type of cancer, the number of diagnosed cases outstripping the annual number of cancers of the breast, lung, prostate, colon, pancreas, ovaries and uterus combined.

Most skin cancers are non-melanoma cancers, known as basal or squamous cell skin cancers, which are attributed to exposure to ultraviolet (UV) rays from the sun and from tanning beds.

UVA rays are responsible for long-term skin damage, such as loss of elasticity, wrinkles, dark patches commonly called liver spots or age spots, and pre-cancerous changes in the skin. UVB rays cause direct damage to the skin cells as well as sunburn. Exposure to both UVA and UVB rays can lead to skin cancer.

Sun damage is cumulative, adding up over a lifetime. While sunburn's redness, pain and peeling will quickly pass, the damage that each sunburn causes is permanent. "A few blistering sunburns in childhood can double an individual's odds of developing skin cancer in later life," said Debbie Welch, R.N., of the Salisbury Visiting Nurse Association.

That's why parents need to be hyper-vigilant regarding sun safety. Children's skin can be particularly sensitive to the chemicals in sunscreens, so applying a small amount to the child's wrist ahead of time helps determine that the child doesn't have an allergic reaction, an important thing to know before putting it all over his or her body. If their child is school age or attends day care, parents should find out what steps the school or day care center takes to prevent sunburn, such as avoiding outdoor activities at midday and ensuring that the playground has adequate shade.

"Infants should be kept out of direct sun," Welch said. "Cover up the baby's skin with protective clothing, including a sun hat. Use your stroller's canopy or hood to shade the baby and avoid midday sun." Most sunscreen manufacturers warn against using sunscreen on infants under six months. Keep the baby out of the sun instead.

Teenagers may pose the biggest problem for parents because fashion decrees a tan. Unfortunately, there is no such thing as a "safe tan." "Tanning injures the skin's deeper layers that you can't see, and the damage worsens with each successive tan," Welch warns. The popular myth that getting a "base tan" at a tanning parlor will prevent burning later at the beach is just that, a myth. According to the Environmental Working Group, the UV radiation in tanning parlors can be up to 15 times that of the sun.

There are several simple ways to lower your risk of non-melanoma skin cancer:

- Stay out of the sun between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.
- Cover up as much as possible with tightly woven clothing—not a tee shirt—and always wear a hat.
- Always use a sunscreen with an SPF (sun protective factor) of 15 or higher, although super-high numbers, above SPF 30, offer little extra protection. More important is using sunscreen lavishly and reapplying after swimming, toweling off, or perspiring.
- Use sunscreen even on overcast or hazy days.
- Avoid sunscreens that contain insect repellent. Insects are more of a bother in the evening anyway, and the combination of chemicals can cause a greater absorption of pesticide through the skin.
- Wear sunglasses that offer 99 to 100% UV absorption. UV radiation cannot only burn the eyelids, but can contribute to the development of cataracts. Do not assume that your sunglasses offer enough protection. Prescription glasses can be treated with a material that blocks UV rays while leaving the lenses clear.

There is a particular sun-related issue that has raised the hackles of Connecticut's Attorney General, members of Congress and consumer safety groups, among others. The FDA (Food and Drug Administration) has not updated its sunscreen labeling standards in 30 years. It's important to understand that the SPF rating applies to UVB protection only. There currently are no FDA-mandated standards for UVA protection, thus a manufacturer's claims of "UVA-UVB" or "broad spectrum" protection or "sun block" may not be what you think they are. With unenforceable FDA guidelines, rather than mandatory standards in place, companies can use marketing terms that are misleading at best. The FDA is being pressured to impose updated standards in the coming weeks, but manufacturers still may have up to two years to comply.

In the meantime, you have to protect yourself by being sensible about exposure to the sun. "A certain amount of sunshine is good for us—it lifts our spirits and we need it to produce Vitamin D—but like everything else, too much is not a good thing," Welch said.

To review the Environmental Working Group's Skin Deep rating of sunscreens go to www.cosmeticsdatabase.com/special/sunscreens2008/findyoursunscreen.php MOMs, a mother's support group, www.safemilk.org also has helpful sunscreen information.