

Having fun should include protection from the sun

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

The sun, a rather ordinary star at the center of our solar system, has given rise to generations of sun worshipers. But while some exposure to sunlight can be healthy and enjoyable, too much can be dangerous. The sun emits ultraviolet rays, an invisible form of radiation that can penetrate the skin and cause skin cancer, which is the most common form of cancer in the United States. Overexposure to ultraviolet radiation can also damage your eyes as well as your body's immune system by altering disease-fighting white blood cells.

Skin cancer affects more than 1 million people each year in the United States, but skin cancer and other ultraviolet-related health effects are largely preventable. The vast majority of skin cancers are associated with ultraviolet radiation exposure. Ultraviolet rays are most intense between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., and can be almost as strong on cloudy days. Even if you don't plan to spend the day on a beach, you're likely to soak up some rays as you run errands, walk your dog or wait for the bus. It's impossible to completely avoid sunlight, nor would it be wise, says Martin A. Weinstock, MD, PhD, chair of the American Cancer Society's Skin Cancer Advisory Group and professor of dermatology and community health at Brown University in Rhode Island.

"Don't be a couch potato, but don't be a baked potato either," Weinstock says.

"Physical activity is very important. A lot of physical activity occurs outdoors, and we don't want people to lay on a couch watching TV because they're afraid of being outdoors."



So the best protection is "slip, slop, slap," Weinstock says: "Slip on a shirt, slop on some sunscreen and slap on a hat."

Take care what you wear

While swimsuits are common beachwear, they aren't the best choice for sun protection. You'll have more exposed skin to burn, and five or more sunburns doubles your risk of developing skin cancer. If you're going to be out in the sun, cover up to protect your skin.

According to the American Cancer Society, long-sleeved shirts, long pants and long skirts will give you the most protection. While that might sound like a bit much, especially on a 95-degree day at your neighborhood pool, clothes can literally save your skin, especially cotton clothing with a tight weave. Clothes with a loose weave can allow a lot of ultraviolet radiation to pass through, Weinstock says. Top off your combat uniform with a broad-brimmed hat and sunglasses that block 99 percent to 100 percent of ultraviolet radiation. Exercise extra caution around snow, sand or concrete, because the sun's damaging ultraviolet rays can bounce back at you.

Protect your family from damaging ultraviolet radiation by getting into the habit of consulting the UV Index at www.epa.gov/sunwise/uvindex.html. The UV index tells you how much solar ultraviolet radiation will be reaching you the next day.

Fun in the sun for little ones

Kids spend a lot more time outdoors than most adults, especially during the summer. But it only takes two blistering sunburns during childhood to increase a child's risk of developing skin cancer later in life. Older children should follow the same sun protection regimen as adults, but babies have sensitive skin and can burn easily. Keep babies younger than 6 months out of direct sunlight. The American Academy of Pediatrics says it's okay to use sunscreen on babies younger than 6 months if clothing and shade is unavailable. Choose sun-



American Public
Health Association



Photos and art courtesy iStockphoto

screen that's made for kids, and start with just a small dab to ensure that your child doesn't have a harmful reaction.

Sun care is for everyone

Some think that only fair-skinned people need to be concerned about overexposure to the sun. But all skin types are susceptible to the damaging effects of ultraviolet radiation.

According to the World Health Organization, the incidence of skin cancer is lower in darker-skinned people because they have more protective pigment, but when it does occur, it is often detected at a later and more dangerous stage. But other health effects of overexposure to ultraviolet radiation, such as cataracts and immune suppression, affect people of all skin types at the same rate.



>> For more sun safety tips, visit www.epa.gov/sunwise or www.cancer.org

Show your devotion to lotion

Sunscreens provide some, but not total, protection against the sun's ultraviolet rays. "Use it everywhere that's not covered by clothing," advises Weinstock, who recommends an SPF of 30 or greater.

Don't skimp with the sunscreen — apply it generously about 30 minutes before you head outside and reapply it every two hours. Keep in mind that most sunscreens expire after two or three years and can become ineffective. And remember: Sunscreens should be used for sun protection and not as a reason to stay in the sun longer!

"The healthiest color for your skin is the color you were born with," Weinstock says.

