

How to Protect Your Skin From Sun Damage

By Audrey Cook

Most of us have gotten the message that using sunscreen is important, but experts say the majority of people don't use enough. The American Cancer Society, taking a cue from a successful sun protection campaign in Australia, advises everyone to slip on a shirt, slap on sunscreen and wear a hat.

When most people pack for a family vacation, they throw in a couple of bottles of sunscreen and assume it will be adequate for the week. Wrong! Most experts say you should use one ounce of sunscreen for each application, and apply it every two hours. A family of two adults and two children who plan to spend six hours a day on a beach vacation would need a minimum of three applications per day. That works out to two 4-ounce tubes per day. If you will be sightseeing, biking, and wearing short sleeve shirts and shorts rather than bathing suits, you can get by with one bottle per day. That means for a five-day vacation, you would need at least five bottles of sunscreen.

It is important to protect yourself from UVA rays year round whenever you have sun exposure. For everyday casual activities you should apply the equivalent of a shot glass full of sunscreen before heading outdoors. Apply sunscreen generously to all areas of exposed skin. Women should consider using a moisturizer and/or foundation containing an SPF sunscreen. Reapply sunscreen every two hours or more frequently if you are sweating, going into the water, or in a windy climate. Sunscreens not only protect you from sunburn, they can help prevent premature aging and skin cancer. Also remember to wear a lip balm with an SPF of 15 or higher.

Many people mistakenly believe they don't need a sunscreen on cloudy days. In fact, you can burn worse than on a sunny day since you tend not to use as much sun protection. Baseball caps don't provide enough coverage. Hat brims should be at least three inches wide all around to protect the entire head. A white tee shirt has an SPF factor of 5 to 9, better than no shirt, but not as good as a sunscreen of 15 to 30. Dermatologists say most people don't apply enough sunscreen and forget important areas around the ears, eyes and neck.

What's the difference between a sunscreen and sunblock? Sunscreen needs to be applied 30 minutes before sun exposure so it can soak into your skin and form a layer of protection. Sunblock begins to work as soon as it is rubbed into the skin. Only broad-spectrum sunscreens protect from both UVA and UVB rays. UVB rays burn the top layers of skin while UVA rays effect the lower layers of skin and contribute to aging. Look for sunscreens with ingredients that provide

broad-spectrum protection including benzophenones (oxybenzone), cinnamates (octylmethyl cinnamate and cinoxate), sulisobenzene, salicylates, titanium dioxide, zinc oxide, and avobenzone.

When shopping for sun care protection products, read labels carefully and keep in mind that most people need a sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 15 or higher. The number indicates how long you can stay in the sun without burning. If you burn in 10 minutes without applying any sunscreen, a generous dose of SPF15 will protect you from sunburn for two hours and 30 minutes. Sunscreens with SPF numbers higher than 15 are recommended for people with fair skin and those who live at high altitudes, work or play outdoors most of the day, or perspire heavily.

It is smart to make applying sunscreen a part of your daily routine like brushing your teeth. Keep a bottle of sunscreen in your bathroom and apply it every day before you go out. If you have sensitive skin, look for sunscreens that are noncomedogenic and PABA-free.

When possible avoid sun exposure between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. Wear a wide-brimmed hat and protect your eyes with sunglasses. Be extra careful with small children and don't allow them to play in the sun too long. Many studies have shown that sun overexposure early in life leads to skin cancer in later years.

The SPF numbers on sunscreens only rate UVB protection. Premature aging, immune suppressions, skin cancer and cataracts are the result of both UVA and UVB exposure. Until the FDA completes its new standards for sunscreens, it is advisable to take additional protective measures. Health organizations such as the American Cancer Society and the American Academy of Pediatricians believe that using sunscreens of SPF15 or higher and wearing protective clothing, along with avoiding midday sun exposure, are the most effective strategies for sun protection.