



Patient Information

Protect Yourself From the Sun

The sun's rays can be very damaging. Because it's unrealistic to avoid the sun entirely, you should take steps to protect yourself.

How the Sun Affects You

Ultraviolet A (UVA) and ultraviolet B (UVB) are the two types of UV rays from the sun that can harm you. Although UVA penetrates deeper into the skin than UVB does, both can be damaging.

As UV rays penetrate the skin, more melanin — a natural, dark pigment — is produced. The melanin moves toward the outer layers of the skin and produces a tan.

A sunburn usually appears within a few hours of exposure and may cause pain, redness, swelling and blistering. It may also cause a headache or fever or make you tired. If you're sunburned, take a cool bath or shower, apply aloe vera lotion, and leave any blisters alone. If necessary, take an over-the-counter pain reliever such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen.

Using Sunscreen

In general, the most hazardous hours of the day for UV exposure in the continental United States are between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. If possible, limit your sun exposure during this time.

Keep in mind that UV rays can reach you even on cloudy and hazy days. UV rays can also reflect off surfaces such as snow, water and cement.

If you will be outside between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., use sunscreen. Sunscreen absorbs, reflects or scatters the sun's rays. Choose a broad-spectrum sunscreen that protects against both UVA and UVB rays.

Each sunscreen has a sun protection factor (SPF). Experts recommend using sunscreen with an SPF of at least 15. The higher the SPF, the more protection against the sun's rays.

Apply sunscreen about 20 to 30 minutes before you go outside. Don't forget areas such as the ears, back of the neck and exposed parts of your scalp. Apply a lip balm that contains sunscreen.

No sunscreen provides complete protection, so it's important to reapply every 2 hours or so. Reapply sunscreen more often if you're

swimming or sweating a lot, and especially if you towel off, which causes sunscreen to rub off.

Check the expiration date of your sunscreen. Throw the sunscreen out if it's too old, or if it has changed color, dried up or changed consistency.

Proper Dress

Loose-fitting pants or skirts and long-sleeved shirts made from tightly woven fabric offer the best protection. Dark-colored clothes provide more protection than light-colored clothing. Also, dry clothes offer more protection from the sun than wet clothes.

Wearing a hat can help protect your skin. Choose a hat that has a 2- to 3-inch brim all the way around it to help protect areas such as the neck, eyes, ears, forehead, nose and scalp.

Sunglasses provide important sun protection and reduce the risk of cataracts. No matter how darkly tinted the sunglasses are, check to be sure that they block UV rays (this protection comes from an invisible chemical applied). Wraparound sunglasses are best, since they also block out sun coming in from the sides.

Long-Term Effects of the Sun

Unprotected exposure to UV rays through the years can cause prematurely aged skin, wrinkles and loss of elasticity, as well as precancerous and cancerous skin lesions. The three types of cancerous lesions are basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma and melanoma.

Basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma are considered nonmelanoma skin cancers. They are the most common and can be treatable if detected early. Melanoma is much less common than nonmelanoma cancers, and although it is highly curable in its early stages, it can spread to other parts of the body and become much more serious.

Check your skin often for any new growths or marks, and for changes in moles, freckles or other existing marks on your skin.

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov) and the American Cancer Society (www.cancer.org).

Additional Notes:
