

Healthy People

Skin Cancer Prevention

Skin cancer is the most common cancer in the United States. In fact, more skin cancers are diagnosed in the US each year than all other cancers combined. The number of skin cancer cases has been going up over the past few decades.

The good news is that you can do a lot to protect yourself and your family from skin cancer, or catch it early so that it can be treated effectively. Most skin cancers are caused by too much exposure to ultraviolet (UV) rays. Most of this exposure comes from the sun, but some may come from man-made sources, such as indoor tanning beds and sun lamps.

You don't need any x-rays or blood tests to find skin cancer early – just your eyes and a mirror. If you have skin cancer, finding it early is the best way to make sure it can be treated with success.

How do I protect myself from UV rays? People who get a lot of exposure to ultraviolet (UV) rays are at greater risk for skin cancer. Sunlight is the main source of UV rays, but you don't have to avoid the sun completely. And it would be unwise to stay inside if it would keep you from being active, because physical activity is important for good health. But getting too much sun can be harmful. There are some steps you can take to limit your exposure to UV rays. Some people think about sun protection only when they spend a day at the lake, beach, or pool. But sun exposure adds up day after day, and it happens every time you are in the sun.

Simply staying in the shade is one of the best ways to limit your UV exposure. If you are going to be in the sun, "Slip! Slop! Slap!® and Wrap" is a catchphrase that can help you remember some of the key steps you can take to protect yourself from UV rays:

- **Slip on a shirt**
- **Slop on sunscreen**
- **Slap on a hat**
- **Wrap on sunglasses to protect the eyes and skin around them**

Protect your skin with clothing. When you are out in the sun, wear clothing to cover as much skin as possible. Clothes provide different levels of UV protection. Long-sleeved shirts, long pants, or long skirts cover the most skin and are the most protective. Dark colors generally provide more protection than light colors. A tightly woven fabric protects better than loosely woven clothing. Dry fabric is generally more protective than wet fabric. Be aware that covering up doesn't block out all UV rays. If you can see light through a fabric, UV rays can get through, too.

Use sunscreen. Sunscreen is a product that you put on your skin to protect it from the sun's UV rays. But it's important to know that sunscreen is just a filter – it does not block all UV rays. Sunscreen should not be used as a way to prolong your time in the sun. Even with proper sunscreen use, some UV rays get through, which is why using other forms of sun protection is also important. Read the labels. When choosing a sunscreen product, be sure to read the label. Sunscreens with broad spectrum protection (against both UVA and UVB rays) and with sun protection factor (SPF) values of 30 or higher are recommended.

Only broad spectrum sunscreen products with an SPF of 15 or higher can state that they help protect against skin cancer and early skin aging if used as directed with other sun protection measures. Water resistant sunscreen: Sunscreens are no longer allowed to be labeled as "waterproof" or "sweatproof" because these terms can be misleading. Sunscreens can claim to be "water resistant," but they have to state whether they protect the skin for 40 or 80 minutes of swimming or sweating, based on testing.

Be sure to apply the sunscreen properly. Always follow the label directions. Most recommend applying sunscreen generously. When putting it on, pay close attention to your face, ears, neck, arms, and any other areas not covered by clothing. If you're going to wear insect repellent or makeup, put the sunscreen on first. Ideally, about 1 ounce of sunscreen (about a shot glass or palmful) should be used to cover the arms, legs, neck, and face of the average adult. Sunscreen needs to be reapplied at least every 2 hours to maintain protection. Sunscreens can wash off when you sweat or swim and then wipe off with a towel, so they might need to be reapplied more often. Be sure to read the label. And don't forget your lips; lip balm with sunscreen is also available.



Wear a hat. A hat with at least a 2- to 3-inch brim all around is ideal because it protects areas that are often exposed to intense sun, such as the ears, eyes, forehead, nose, and scalp. A dark, non-reflective underside to the brim can also help lower the amount of UV rays reaching the face from reflective surfaces such as water. A shade cap (which looks like a baseball cap with about 7 inches of fabric draping down the sides and back) also is good, and will provide more protection for the neck. These are often sold in sports and outdoor supply stores. If you don't have a shade cap (or another good hat) available, you can make one by wearing a large handkerchief or bandana under a baseball cap. A baseball cap protects the front and top of the head but not the neck or the ears, where skin cancers commonly develop. Straw hats are not as protective as hats made of tightly woven fabric.

Wear sunglasses that block UV rays. UV-blocking sunglasses are important for protecting the delicate skin around the eyes, as well as the eyes themselves. Research has shown that long hours in the sun without protecting your eyes increase your chances of developing certain eye diseases. The ideal sunglasses should block 99% to 100% of UVA and UVB rays. Before you buy, check the label to make sure they do. Labels that say "UV absorption up to 400 nm" or "Meets ANSI UV Requirements" mean the glasses block at least 99% of UV rays. Those labeled "cosmetic" block about 70% of UV rays. If there is no label, don't assume the sunglasses provide any UV protection.

Darker glasses are not necessarily better because UV protection comes from an invisible chemical in or applied to the lenses, not from the color or darkness of the lenses. Look for an ANSI label. Large-framed and wraparound sunglasses are more likely to protect your eyes from light coming in from different angles. Children need smaller versions of real, protective adult sunglasses – not toy sunglasses.



Protect children from the sun. Children need special attention. They tend to spend more time outdoors, can burn more easily, and may not be aware of the dangers. You should develop the habit of using sunscreen on exposed skin for yourself and your children whenever you go outdoors and may be exposed to large amounts of sunlight. Children need to be taught about the dangers of too much sun exposure as they become more independent. If you or your child burns easily, be extra careful to cover up, limit exposure, and apply sunscreen.

Babies younger than 6 months should be kept out of direct sunlight and protected from the sun using hats and protective clothing. Sunscreen may be used on small areas of exposed skin only if adequate clothing and shade are not available.

A word about sun exposure and vitamin D. Doctors are learning that vitamin D has many health benefits. It might even help lower the risk for some cancers. Your skin makes vitamin D naturally when you are in the sun. How much vitamin D you make depends on many things, including how old you are, how dark

your skin is, and how strong the sunlight is where you live. At this time, doctors aren't sure what the optimal level of vitamin D is. A lot of research is being done in this area. Whenever possible, it's better to get vitamin D from your diet or vitamin supplements rather than from sun exposure because dietary sources and vitamin supplements do not increase skin cancer risk, and are typically more reliable ways to get the amount you need.

Have a safe and fun Summer!

