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Summer Sun Safety Tips

Here we are in Florida in the summertime. The sun is bright and hot every day. It's easy to forget that everyone is at risk of skin cancer. People with light skin color, light hair or eye color, a family history of skin cancer, chronic sun exposure, a history of sunburns early in life, and/or those who have large numbers of freckles or moles are especially at risk of skin cancer, according to the American Cancer Society. Some people may think that rays from artificial sources of light such as tanning booths are safe, but they also increase the risk of skin cancer. More than one million people in the United States are diagnosed with skin cancer each year. People do die from skin cancer.

What can we do? Try to limit sun exposure to the strong, midday sun between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., wear protective clothing (tightly woven natural-fiber garments with loose fitting long sleeves and long pants whenever possible), and use sunscreen.

When you are going out apply sunscreen with a sun protective factor (SPF) of at least 15. You should be aware that an SPF of 30 is not twice as protective as an SPF of 15. When properly used, an SPF of 15 protects the skin from 93 percent of the UVB radiation, and an SPF 30 sunscreen provides 97 percent protection. The UVB rays impact the surface of the skin and are the primary cause of sunburn. The UVA rays penetrate deep into the skin and heavily contribute to premature aging. Up to 90 percent of the visible skin changes commonly attributed to aging are caused by sun exposure. Some sunscreen manufacturers include ingredients that protect the skin from some UVA rays as well. These "broad-spectrum" sunscreens are highly recommended.

Apply sunscreen 20 minutes before going outdoors to give it time to absorb into your skin. Apply it well and regularly - and reapply it at least every two hours. If you are going to be in the water or sweating a lot, use water-resistant sunscreen. Don't forget about lips, ears, feet, backs of your hands, bald spots and the back of the neck. In addition, apply sunscreen to areas under bathing suit straps, necklaces, bracelets, and sunglasses.

Are you taking medications for a health condition? Some medications can increase sensitivity to the sun. Examples are tetracycline antibiotics, sulfonamides such as Bactrim, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen, and some fluoroquinolones. Some antihistamines and even certain herbal remedies can cause extra sensitivity to the sun's rays. Cosmetics that contain alpha hydroxy acids (AHAs) may also increase sun sensitivity and the possibility of sunburn.

Examples are glycolic acid and lactic acid. It is important to protect your skin from the sun while using AHA-containing products and for a week after discontinuing their use.

According to the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD), along with regularly using sunscreen, it's smart to wear wide-brimmed hats and seek shade under a beach umbrella or a tree. Sunscreens alone may not always protect you. And don't forget sunglasses, those with larger lenses give more protection to the sensitive skin around the eyes and may reduce the long-term risk of developing cataracts. People who wear UV-absorbing contact lenses still should wear UV-absorbing sunglasses, since contact lenses don't completely cover the eye. Effective sunglasses should block 99 to 100 percent of both UVA and UVB rays.

There is a new sunscreen on the market that claims to provide a protective second-skin that is supposed to offer protection from jellyfish stings (and maybe mosquitos)! If you can't find that type of sunscreen (it's new) take a small bottle of vinegar with you when you go to the beach. It's an effective treatment for jellyfish stings.

If you do get a sunburn, don't put ice or butter on it. Use a cold compress instead. According to the Food and Drug Administration, over-the-counter pain relievers may also be helpful. Mild and moderate cases may be helped by topical corticosteroids such as hydrocortisone. Severe cases may require oral steroids such as prednisone.

An estimate 80 percent of a person's sun exposure occurs before age 18. For this reason, it is important that children be protected from overexposure. Sunscreen should be applied and reapplied to all exposed areas. Blistering sunburns during childhood significantly increase the risk of developing skin cancer later in life.

If you have sunscreen products left over from last year do they still work? You can keep sunscreen products until the expiration date or for no more than three years, because the active ingredients can become less effective over time.

Be on the lookout for moles that change color or size, moles that bleed, or moles that have an irregular, spreading edge - all potential signs of skin cancer. Have a doctor check unusual moles immediately.

Although some may think suntans are fashionable, taking precautions to avoid sunburns is important for comfort now and safety in the future.