

## Protecting the Skin from Sun Damage 101

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**Y**ou can never start protecting your skin at too early an age, says Terry O'Grady, M.D., Clinical Professor in UCSD Healthcare's Departments of Dermatology and Pathology. Recent studies have indicated that skin damaged by severe sunburns in early childhood is an important factor in developing melanoma later in life. O'Grady says that taking proper precautions early on can prevent acquiring this sometimes deadly form of cancer.

"Start as early as possible," O'Grady says. "Teach your kids that it's not cool to get sunburned. Make skin protection with sun screen or sun block as routine as taking a daily vitamin."

Speaking of screens and blocks, O'Grady advises patients to use products with no less than 30 SPF. A sunscreen's Sun Protection Factor (SPF) measures the length of time a product protects against skin reddening from UVB, compared to how long the skin takes to redden without protection.

"The SPF ratings are determined in a controlled laboratory setting and do not account for swimming, sweating or other activities," he says, "sunscreen does wear off."

O'Grady advises patients who are going to be outdoors or in the water to apply often, at least every four hours, and to use sunblock because it physically blocks ultra violet rays, whereas sunscreen does allow some ultra violet to penetrate the skin.

"Sun block used to be that white cream you would see people wearing on their noses in the summer. These days sun block is still made of the same ingredients (zinc and titanium) but they have been micronized which makes them transparent and more cosmetically palatable," he says.

To avoid skin damage from the sun O'Grady also advises staying out of the sun between 10am and 2pm, peak hours for harmful ultraviolet rays. If you must go outside he suggests wearing protective clothing such as a hat with a large brim to cover the back of the neck and ears. "A baseball cap doesn't cut it," he says. "It doesn't provide hardly any protection at all."

Long sleeves and pants are also key to protecting vulnerable skin when outside. What kind of fabric?

"If you can hold the fabric up to the sun and see through it, ultra violet rays are still getting through," he warns. O'Grady says there are a number of manufacturers today making clothing that keeps out the ultraviolet rays. Although he admits they are expensive they are a good investment for people who spend a lot of time outdoors.

O'Grady acknowledges that men often hate to apply sunscreen and sun block because they don't like applying creams and lotions. No problem he says, sunscreens and sunblocks are now available in easy to use pump sprays and lotions. For women who apply moisturizers in the morning and don't want to apply another layer of a creamy sunblock he suggests using a product with a high SPF in the formula.

But what to do if you do accidentally get a sunburn? "Take a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory, like ibuprofen, to help reduce the redness and inflammation," he says. "If it blisters, you have a second degree burn, and should seek medical attention. The same goes for kids, get them to a doctor right away. Whether it's a first or second-degree burn, even though you'll want to put a salve on it to soothe the soreness, try not to. You don't want to clog the skin, that certainly doesn't help," he says.

O'Grady says that if you're one of those people who doesn't think sun exposure is damaging your skin compare the skin on your face and backs of your hands with the skin on a part of your body that is seldom exposed, such as under the arms. There's no going back to your previous youthful skin, but you can prevent it from further deterioration or getting skin cancer. If you don't already use it, start applying sun block. And if you do, keep it applied regularly and stay covered.

Routine examination of the skin remains the best method to detect skin cancers in an early stage. Examining your skin regularly for any suspicious mole is the best way to detect skin cancer when it is still curable by simple excision.

There are several forms of skin cancer. Predominantly, they arise from changes caused from chronic sun exposure. Watch for these signs:

- → Basal cell cancer is the most common form, tends to grow slowly and remains localized. It most often appears on areas of the body exposed to the sun. Look for a small, fleshy bump with a smooth, pearly appearance or a scar like lesion that is firm to the touch, a bump that bleeds, crusts over, and then repeats the cycle or a red, tender, flat spot that bleeds easily.
- → Squamous cell cancer is more common after age 60. A hard lump occurs with red or brown irregular edges. An ulcer may develop within the lesion but does not heal.
- → Malignant melanoma often appears as dark moles that change and also may exhibit irregular edges. Itching is common, as is bleeding and changes in color. Be careful, this type of skin cancer can develop very quickly and is life-threatening.

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