

SUN SAFETY

Save Your Skin!

Sun safety is never out of season. Summer's arrival means it's time for picnics, trips to the pool and beach ... and a spike in sunburns. But winter skiers and fall hikers need to be as wary of the sun's rays as swimmers do. People who work outdoors need to take precautions as well.

The need for sun safety has become clear over the past 20 years, with studies showing that excessive exposure to the sun can cause skin cancer. Harmful rays from the sun—and from sunlamps and tanning beds—may also cause eye problems, weaken your immune system, and give you unsightly skin spots and wrinkles, or “leathery” skin.

Sun damage to the body is caused by invisible ultraviolet (UV) radiation, which reaches us as long wavelengths known as UVA and short wavelengths known as UVB. UVB radiation can cause sunburn. But the longer wavelength UVA is dangerous too, as it can penetrate the skin and damage tissue at deeper levels.

Tanning is a sign of the skin reacting to potentially damaging UV radiation by producing additional pigmentation that provides it with some—but not nearly enough—pro-



Getty Images

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tection against sunburn.

No matter what our skin color, we're all potential victims of sunburn and the other detrimental effects of excessive exposure to UV radiation. Although we all need to take precautions to protect our skin, people who need to be especially careful in the sun are those who have

- pale skin.
- blonde, red or light brown hair.
- been treated for skin cancer.
- a family member who's had skin cancer.

If you have an illness and take medicines, ask your doctor about extra sun-care precautions, because some medications may increase sensitivity to the sun.

Cosmetics that contain alpha hydroxy acids (AHAs) also may increase sun sensitivity and susceptibility to sunburn. Look for FDA's recommended sunburn alert statement on products that contain AHAs.

Reduce time in the sun

This is especially recommended from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., when the sun's rays are strongest. Even on an overcast day, up to 80% of the sun's UV rays can get through the clouds. Stay in the shade as much as possible throughout the day.

Dress with care

Wear clothes that protect your body. Cover as much of your body as possible if you plan to be outside on a sunny day. Wear a wide-brimmed hat, long sleeves and long pants. Sun-protective clothing is now available in stores. However, FDA does not regulate such products unless the manufacturer intends to make a medical claim. Consider using an umbrella for shade.

Be serious about sunscreen

Check product labels to make sure you get

- a "sun protection factor" (SPF) of 15 or more—SPF represents the degree to which a sunscreen can protect the skin from sunburn. The higher the number, the better the protection.
- "broad spectrum" protection—sunscreen that protects against UVA and UVB.
- water resistance—sunscreen that stays on your skin longer, even if it gets wet. "Water-resistant" does not mean "waterproof." Water-resistant sunscreens need to be reapplied as instructed on the label.

Tips for applying sunscreen

- Apply the recommended amount evenly to all uncovered skin, especially your lips, nose, ears, neck, hands, and feet.
- Check the label for the correct amount of time to apply it before you go out.
- If the label doesn't give a time, allow about 15 to 30 minutes.
- If you don't have much hair, apply sunscreen to the top of your head, or wear a hat.
- Reapply at least every two hours. Read the label to see how often.
- Give babies and children extra care in the sun. Ask a doctor before applying sunscreen to children under 6 months old.
- Apply sunscreen to children older than 6 months every time they go out.

Don't forget the eyes

Sunlight reflecting off snow, sand or water further increases exposure to UV radiation, increasing your risk

of developing eye problems such as cataracts.

Long hours on the beach or in the snow without adequate eye protection also can result in a short-term condition known as photokeratitis, or reversible sunburn of the cornea. This painful condition--also known as "snow blindness"—can cause temporary loss of vision.

- When buying sunglasses, look for a label that specifically offers 99-100% UV protection. This assures that the glasses block both forms of UV radiation.
- Eyewear should be labeled "sunglasses." Be wary of dark or tinted eyewear sold as fashion accessories that may provide little or no protection from UV or visible light.
- Don't assume that you get more UV protection with pricier sunglasses or glasses with a darker tint.
- Be sure that your sunglasses don't distort colors and affect the recognition of traffic signals.
- Ask an eye care professional to test your sunglasses if you're not sure of their level of UV protection.
- People who wear contact lenses that offer UV protection should still wear sunglasses.
- Consider that light can still enter from the sides of sunglasses. Those that wrap all the way around the temples can help.
- Children should wear real sunglasses—not toy sunglasses—that indicate the UV protection level. Polycarbonate lenses are the most shatter-resistant.

Sunlamp products

Some experts argue that artificial tanning is less dangerous because the intensity of light and the time spent

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tanning are controlled. There is limited evidence to support these claims. On the other hand, sunlamps may be more dangerous than the sun because they can be used at the same intensity every day of the year—something that is unlikely for the sun because of winter weather and cloud cover. They can also be more dangerous because people can expose their entire bodies at each session, which would be difficult to do outdoors.

FDA requires manufacturers of sunlamps to develop an exposure schedule and establish a maximum recommended exposure time based on the UV emission characteristics of their products.

Tips for tanning indoors

If you use indoor tanning equipment, follow these steps to reduce the dangers of UV exposure:

- Wear the goggles provided. Make sure they fit snugly and are not cracked.
- Start slowly and use short exposure times to build up a tan over time.
- Don't use the maximum exposure time the first time you tan because you could get burned, and burns are thought to be related to melanoma.
- Follow manufacturer-recommended exposure times on the label for your skin type.
- Stick to your time limit.
- After a tan is developed, tan no more than once a week. Because sunburn takes 6 to 48 hours to develop, you may not realize your skin is burned until it is too late.

So-called "Tanning Pills"

No tanning pills of any kind have been approved by FDA.

Check For Skin Cancer

Check your skin regularly for signs of skin cancer. Look for changes in the size, shape, color or feel of birthmarks, moles and spots. If you find any changes or find sores that are not healing, see your doctor.

However, there are companies that market products they call "tanning pills." Some of these pills contain a color additive known as canthaxanthin, which, when ingested, can turn the skin a range of colors from orange to brown. Canthaxanthin is only approved for use as a color additive in foods and oral medications, and only in small amounts.

Dihydroxyacetone (DHA)

Some tanning sprays contain DHA, a color additive that interacts with the dead surface cells in the outermost layer of the skin, to darken skin color. It is commonly used in "sunless tanning" lotions, creams, and spray-on products.

DHA is approved by FDA for use in coloring the skin, but it is limited to external application. The industry has not provided safety data to FDA to consider approving it for other uses, such as applying it to your lips or the area of your eyes, or inhaling it. Therefore, the risks, if any, are unknown. FDA recommends that if you visit a spray tanning salon, take precautions to protect your eyes and lips and avoid inhaling the spray.

Some tanning products on the market do not contain sunscreen. FDA requires these products to carry a warning statement. 

Web page (www.fda.gov/consumer), which features the latest on all FDA-regulated products. Sign up for free e-mail subscriptions at www.fda.gov/consumer/consumerenews.html.

For More Information

Talk to your doctor or health care professional, or visit:

Safer Sunning in Seven Steps
www.fda.gov/opacom/lowlit/sunafety.html

CDRH Tanning Web site
www.fda.gov/cdrh/tanning/index.html

Tanning Products
www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/cos-sun.html

National Institutes of Health, U.S. National Library of Medicine: Sun Exposure
www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/sunexposure.html

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