

Protecting Your Skin

Excessive exposure to the sun and other sources of ultraviolet (UV) radiation is clearly associated with a higher risk of multiple forms of skin cancer. Since skin cancer is diagnosed in over one million Americans every year, experts from Mercy Medical Center, the American Cancer Society, the National Cancer Institute, the American Academy of Dermatology, the National Comprehensive Cancer Network, and many other organizations are unanimous in strongly recommending that you should reduce your time in the sun.

People of all races and skin colors can develop skin cancer, but some are more susceptible than others. If you have one or more of the following risk factors, you should be especially vigilant about reducing your overall UV exposure:

- Fair skin
- Blue, green, or hazel eyes
- Blond or red hair
- Freckles
- Moles (especially 50 or more)
- Family or personal history of skin cancer

When and where is the sun most dangerous?

UV radiation from the sun is especially damaging under certain conditions, including the following:

- from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
- from mid-Spring through mid-Fall
- at latitudes nearer the equator (i.e. Florida)
- at higher altitudes
- when there is no thick cloud cover (and clouds only block 20% of UV rays)
- near water, snow, or other highly reflective surfaces

Sun damage accumulates over time, so if you find yourself in these conditions often, consistent protection is a must. Remember that besides skin cancer, the sun can also cause cataracts and other eye problems, a weakened immune system, unsightly skin spots, wrinkles, and “leathery”

skin.

What is the most effective way to protect yourself?

If you answered “sunscreen,” you’re wrong. The most effective way actually is to simply stay out of the summer sun in the middle of the day. If that’s not possible, wearing dark, tightly-woven clothing and a wide-brimmed hat also works. Only then comes sunscreen, which isn’t a panacea and shouldn’t be exclusively relied upon. Here are some tips to protect yourself:

- Wear sunglasses that include a warranty stating they provide 99-100% UVA and UVB (broad-spectrum) protection.
- Apply one ounce (a palm full) of sunscreen to all exposed skin 15 minutes before venturing outdoors. The sunscreen container should specify a sun protection factor (SPF) rating of 15 or above and should state that it provides broad-spectrum (UVA and UVB) protection. Lotion- or cream-based sunscreens tend to adhere to the skin longer, thus providing better protection.
- PABA-free sunscreens are recommended for persons with sensitive skin.
- Depending on your activity (swimming, sweating), sunscreen should be re-applied at least every two hours.
- The SPF number on the sunscreen recommends how many times longer, under ideal conditions, a person can stay out in the sun without beginning to turn red in comparison with the amount of time totally unprotected skin would start to burn. Research indicates these numbers are sometimes overstated.

For more information on skin protection and good skin health, visit the Health Library at www.mercysiouxcity.com