Sun Protection

Most people enjoy spending at least some of their time outdoors. Sun exposure is an inevitable part of outdoor activity. Unfortunately, skin damage and skin cancer are risks associated with the sun. Over time, sun exposure causes skin to lose resilience. This leads to the development of blotches, “freckles” (solar lentigines), wrinkles, spider vessels, blackheads, coarse texture and yellow discoloration. Sun exposure also increases your risk of several types of skin cancer. In addition, the outer layer (or lens) of the eye also thickens in response to sun exposure and this can increase the chance of developing cataracts.

Sunlight consists of two types of harmful UV rays – UVB and UVA. UVB rays are the primary cause of sunburn and skin cancer. These rays are blocked by window glass. UVA rays, on the other hand, penetrate through glass and into the dermis, or base layer of the skin. Both types of rays can be problematic for the skin. Fortunately, there a number of things you can to reduce the risk of both skin damage and skin cancer.

SUNSCREEN

The Sun Protection Factor (SPF) on a sunscreen measures its ability to block UVB rays and reduce the risk of sunburn. However, SPF does not measure the amount of protection a sunscreen provides against UVA rays. These rays can cause suppression of the immune system which is basically a weakening of the body’s ability to protect itself from cancer and other diseases. Even with UVB protection, UVA rays can still cause unseen damage and skin cancer. This may explain why some skin cancers can appear anywhere on the body – even places that are not directly exposed to the sun. Although sunscreens offer some protection against UVA rays, it is important to follow a sun protection program.

SUN DAMAGE AND SKIN CANCER

Too much sun at any one time can lead to sunburn (a radiation burn). The redness, pain and swelling from sunburn are comparable to any other type of burn. In most cases, the discomfort is temporary. However, the long-term effects of multiple sunburns are cumulative. Even one significant sunburn increases the risk of the skin cancer, melanoma.

Another problem some sunbathers develop is sun poisoning, an allergic reaction to the UV light called polymorphous light eruption. Redness, bumps /blisters, itching, and burning on exposed skin develop two to five hours after exposure. Other symptoms may include; chills, headache, nausea, and body aches. If this happens, the best thing to do is avoid the sun, especially for long periods of time.

SUN PROTECTION PROGRAM

- To protect your skin from blotches, wrinkles and cancer, apply sunscreen daily. Use a sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 30, even on cloudy days. If you burn easily, freckle or have light hair/eyes, use a sunscreen with a higher SPF than 30.
- If you have oily or acne prone skin, choose an oil-free sunscreen. Choose a PABA-free sunscreen if you are allergic to PABA.
- Apply sunscreen thickly, 15-30 minutes before going outside. One ounce (a shot glass full) is required to cover your entire body. Do not forget to apply to the tops of ears and back of neck. Reapply sunscreen after swimming, heavy outdoor activity or sweating.
- Your tan will not protect you from sun damage or sunburn. Even if you already have a tan, use sunscreen to keep your skin even-toned, young-looking and safe.
- Wear sunglasses with an EPF of 10+ to protect the sensitive skin around your eyes and prevent eye damage. Also wear lip balm with an SPF of 30 or higher to protect your lips.
- Wear lightweight, protective clothing and broad brimmed hats. Rit Sun Guard is a laundry rinse that provides UV blocking ability to your clothes.
- Avoid being out in the sun between 10:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m., especially at mid-day. Follow the “Shadow Rule” – if your shadow is shorter than you are, the sun’s damaging rays are at their strongest and you are most likely to sunburn.
- Some medications can cause increased sun sensitivity or heat intolerance. Be sure to check with your health care provider whenever starting a new medication.
- Pre-tan accelerators, which stimulate your skin’s tanning rate, are not sunscreens. There's no proof that they are safe and they should be avoided.
- Tanning pills are dangerous and should not be taken. They can turn your skin a sickly shade of yellow and damage your internal organs.
• Avoid tanning booths. They cause the same damage and have the same risks as natural sunlight. Plus, several skin infections can be spread in tanning salons.
• Remember: It's never too late to help your skin stay healthy. Even if you have had several sunburns/suntans, you can reduce sun damage and your risk of skin cancer by using a sunscreen now.

TREATMENT FOR SUNBURN
• If your sunburn causes pain, soak the area for five minutes in cold (not ice) water or apply cool compresses. This will provide immediate relief and lessen swelling.
• Avoid greasy substances. They "seal" in the heat and cause further damage. Apply moisturizing lotion or aloe vera gel.
• Avoid cooling lotions with menthol or camphor. They feel good, but can cause allergic reactions. First aid sprays with benzocaine can cause similar reactions and are not advised.
• If your entire body is tender, a cup of dry, instant oatmeal in a tub of cool water can provide a soothing bath.
• If your sunburn causes blisters, swelling and oozing of fluid, it is a second degree burn. Follow-up with a health card provider. Do not use lotions or creams on the burn. To avoid infection, do not break blisters or peel skin.
• Take a pain reliever such as ibuprofen or acetaminophen for discomfort. Benadryl may reduce itching.
• Drink plenty of fluids. Your body will lose moisture due to your burn. Cool fluids will also help you feel more comfortable.
• If you are in need of evaluation, call the Dial-A-Nurse at 333-2700 for an appointment.

References:
UpToDate online, 2009
You may also visit the American Academy of Family Physicians at: www.familydoctor.org

If you are a registered University of Illinois student and you have questions or concerns, or need to make an appointment, please call: Dial-A-Nurse at 333-2700

If you are concerned about any difference in your treatment plan and the information in this handout, you are advised to contact your health care provider.

Visit the McKinley Health Center Web site at: http://www.mckinley.illinois.edu