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Sun's Up! Cover Up!

by Rose Marie Tondl, Extension Clothing Specialist

Do you think you look better with a suntan? Do you think you feel healthier with a suntan? Do you know the dangers of getting too much sun?

Tanning is actually the skin's reaction to protect itself from the sun's harmful rays. Even though a suntan may look nice and make one feel good, there is no medical evidence to suggest that a suntan improves health.

Long-term sun exposure and tanning may appear on the skin 20 or 30 years later. Evidence includes premature skin aging and the risk of skin cancer.

Youth who actively get too much sun today may find that 20 years later they increase their risk of getting skin cancer. Preventive action is important since 80 percent of sun exposure occurs before the age of 18.

Why are the sun's rays so harmful?

It is the ultraviolet (UV) rays that cause suntans and sunburns. There are two types of UV rays; UVA and UVB. UVA rays cause pigment in the skin to darken and cause skin aging. UVB rays cause redness, burning and blistering. These rays are most directly linked to skin cancers.

Skin cancer is caused by excessive and long-term exposure to the sun. The three main types of skin cancer are basal cell, squamous cell and melanoma. Basal cell cancer is the most common skin cancer, followed by squamous cell. Melanoma is the most dangerous form of skin cancer.

Too much exposure to the sun may lead to other skin problems, cataracts and other eye damage, and immune system suppression.

Depending on your skin type, the time of year and amount of sun exposure you get determines whether you will burn or tan. The sensitivity of the skin to burn has been classified on a six-point scale:

- **Type I** (extremely sensitive) always burns, never tans (Celtic);
- **Type II** (very sensitive) burns easily, tans minimally;

- **Type III** (sensitive) burns moderately, tans gradually to a light brown (average Caucasians);
- **Type IV** (minimally sensitive) always tans well to moderately brown (olive skin);
- **Type V** (rarely burns) tans well to a dark brown (brown skin);
- **Type VI** (never burns) deeply pigmented; insensitive (black skin); some may be sensitive to intense sun.

There are several precautions you can take to protect yourself from the sun.

1. Avoid the sun - Stay out of the sun if possible between the hours of 10 a.m. and 3 p.m., when the sun's rays are the strongest.

Check the National Weather Service forecasts for the UV Index in your area. It provides the expected risk of overexposure to the sun and indicates the degree of caution to take when working, playing and exercising outdoors.

On a 0-10+ scale, 0 indicates a low risk and 10+ means a very high risk.

2. Cover up - Wear lightweight, loose-fitting, long-sleeved shirts, pants or long skirts. Tightly woven fabric is best. Clothing labeled as providing protection against the sun is considered a medical device and is regulated by the FDA. Look for "sun protective clothing."

3. Wear a hat - A three-inch broad-brimmed hat protects the back of the neck, ears, eyes and scalp. A baseball cap or visor does provide eye protection, but is limiting for the rest of the face.

4. Wear sunglasses - Look for glasses that block out from 95 to 100 percent of the UVA and UVB rays. Wraparound glasses protect the eyes from all angles.

5. Apply a sunscreen - Use one with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15 or higher. The SPF numbering system was developed as a guide to protect against sunburn. For example, an SPF of 8 means you can stay in the sun eight times longer before burning than if you were wearing no sunscreen. Use sunscreen even on a cloudy day. Clouds allow up to 80 percent of the UV rays to pass through. Read the ingredients and directions for use. Some require reapplication after swimming or after a certain period of time.

6. Practice the "shadow rule" - Seek shade when your shadow is shorter than you are tall.

7. Slip! Slop! Slap! - A sun-safe slogan to keep in mind is Slip! Slop! Slap! Before going outdoors, slip on a shirt, slop on some sunscreen and slap on a hat.

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