

Summer Sun Safety

Summer is here and teenagers are off to the pool, the beach, or an outdoor game of basketball. Despite your advice, applying sunscreen may be one of the last things teenagers are considering as they head out the door. Yet, 50% to 80% of the sun damage done to our skin occurs during childhood and adolescence. Intermittent but intense sun exposure contributes to significantly increased risk for skin cancer later in life. Every sunburn counts so it is never too early to improve sun safety!

Health Problems Related to the Sun

- Skin cancer is potentially the most dangerous consequence of overexposure to the sun.
- Premature aging results from years of sun exposure and leads to thick and wrinkled skin.
- Cataracts have been associated with lack of proper eye protection (sunglasses) from the UV rays of the sun.

Types of Skin Cancer

- Melanoma is the most serious and life-threatening form. The rate of this type of skin cancer is doubling among Caucasian Americans every eight to ten years. Melanoma begins with the uncontrolled growth of pigment-producing cells which leads to a dark pigmented mole. These moles begin as a light brown to black flat mole with irregular borders. They are usually at least one-quarter inch in size, may turn shades of red, blue, or white, and may bleed. Pigment spreading from the border of a mole to surrounding skin is cause for concern and medical consultation. Left undetected, melanoma can spread to internal organs and may result in death. However, with early detection melanoma can be treated successfully.
- Squamous Cell Carcinoma is a second most common form of skin cancer, accounting for approximately 16 percent of diagnosed skin cancer. Sun exposure is one of the major contributing causes. Squamous cell carcinoma appears as a crusty, scaly patch with a hard surface. If untreated, it can spread internally to other parts of the body. However, if diagnosed early, the cure rate is 95 percent.
- Basal Cell Carcinoma accounts for 80 percent of skin cancer. These lesions usually appear as small, pearly nodules or bumps on the skin. Although these tumors do not grow quickly or spread to other parts of the body, they can grow below skin level and cause damage to the bone below the lesion. If detected and treated, the cure rate is over 95 percent.

Facts About Skin Cancer from the American Academy of Dermatology (www.aad.org)

- By using a sunscreen with an SPF of at least 15 until 18 years of age, the risk of developing skin cancer can be reduced by 78 percent.

- Each year, over one million cases of skin cancer are diagnosed in the United States.
- Squamous cell carcinoma has a 95 percent cure rate if detected early but in 1998, approximately 1,200 died from this type of skin cancer.
- One in 79 Americans has a lifetime risk of developing melanoma.
- One person dies every hour from melanoma. According to the American Cancer Society, there were 7,300 deaths in 1999.
- With a family history of melanoma, the risk of getting the disease increases, even without sun exposure.
- Sun exposure is one of the most important factors associated with developing skin cancer.

Facts About Teenagers and the Sun

- Surveys have indicated that most teenagers know about the dangerous effects of sun exposure. However, they still fail to translate this knowledge into sun safe behaviors.
- Most teenagers believe that having a suntan makes them appear more healthy, attractive and sophisticated.
- Although teenagers tend to apply sunscreen when going to the beach, they fail to apply sunscreen on a regular basis when they are involved in other outdoor activities.
- Less than 30 percent reapply sunscreen after swimming.
- Most teenagers believe that sunscreen should only be used during the summer months, not to prevent sun exposure during other times of the year.
- Less than half of teenagers surveyed reported that they wore sunglasses to protect their eyes from the sun.

Tips from Dermatologists About Playing It Safe

- Limit the amount of time in the sun between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. when the sun's UV rays are the strongest.
- Thirty minutes prior to being in the sun, apply a sunscreen of at least SPF 15. Remember to apply to all exposed skin including ears, nose, neck, and hands.
- Reapply sunscreen after swimming, toweling off, or excessive sweating. Otherwise, reapply every 2 hours. Even waterproof sunscreen wears off!
- Remember the lips with a lip balm with a SPF of at least 15.
- Sunscreen is not just for the summer! Help your teenager get into the daily habit of applying a sunscreen or moisturizer with SPF 15.
- Wear sunglasses that block UVA/UVB rays or a wide-brimmed hat (at least a 4 inch brim) to protect the eyes. Your neck, ears, and face will also be protected when wearing a hat.
- Trees and umbrellas offer great protection. Whenever possible, stay in the shade!
- Cover up with tightly woven clothing.
- As a parent, be a good role model by wearing sunscreen, sunglasses, a hat, and by avoiding the sun during peak hours. By doing this, you will be protecting your skin and your teenagers!

For additional information on adolescent health issues visit the AMA Adolescent Health Web site at www.ama-assn.org/go/adolescenthealth.

This information was adapted from materials that originally appeared on the Tips on Teens Web site authored by Susan Panzarine, PhD and Elaine Rubenstein, PhD, LCSW-C. The content on summer sun safety was written by Elisa Rusonis, PhD and Paul Rusonis, MD. Dr. Panzarine is the author of *A Parent's Guide to the Teen Years: Raising Your 11- to 14-year-old in the Age of Chat Rooms and Navel Rings*, published in 2000 by Checkmark Books. Dr. Rubenstein maintains an active private practice, working with teenagers and their families.

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