

Ask Dr. Sue your health and safety questions



Sun Safety

by Susan S. Aronson, MD

Despite the wide publicity about the health risk of sun exposure, many people still seek tans and let children play in the sun without appropriate protection. The sun gives visible light that we enjoy. Unfortunately, it also gives invisible ultraviolet light types A and B that damage the skin.

UVA is the tanning ray that penetrates deep down below the surface of your skin. It weakens the connective tissues and blood vessels, tans and wrinkles your skin, and suppresses your body's immune system. UVB is the burning ray that reddens the skin. These rays penetrate the clouds. Both UVA and UVB rays can be reflected from water, light-colored concrete, and snow.

Even a little tan is not good for the skin. Tanning is the skin's response to sun injury in the same way a callous is a response to excess friction. Unfortunately, when the skin is injured enough to produce a tan, it is also injured enough to increase the risk of cancer, wrinkles, and premature aging.

Sunblock reflects UVA and UVB rays. Sunscreen absorbs UVB rays

better than UVA rays. These products help, but protective clothing and shade are still necessary. One severe sunburn before 18 years of age doubles the risk for melanoma, the deadliest type of skin cancer.

Each time you get a little pink from the sun, the damage is piling up. Even dark-skinned people who rarely burn need sun protection to prevent deep tissue damage. It's never too soon or too late to care for your skin.

Pediatric dermatologists and pediatricians are spreading the word about using shade and sunscreen to protect against sun injury to the skin. You can help teach children this message by using the *Easy as ABC Sun Safety Program* developed by Susan Boiko, MD. Dr. Boiko's mom is a children's author. They have generously shared their work so early childhood professionals can help caregivers, parents, and children avoid skin damage from the sun.

Dr. Boiko suggests that you start a month or more before the sun season to alert parents about the program's sun safety program. That's the time to review the policies,

check on shade in play areas, notify parents about clothing requirements, collect parental permission for sunscreen use, buy the sunscreen, and set the date on the calendar for using sunscreen.

Just before the sun season is a good time to present an educational program to caregivers, children, and parents. Even though you may have missed the planning period for this year, do what you can, and put a reminder on your calendar to prepare for the sun season next year.

The program begins with a letter home to parents about the initiative. The child care staff ask parents to make wearing sun protection a daily health habit. Routinely wear protective clothing, seek shade between 10 AM and 4 PM, and apply sunscreen or sunblock before going outside. Wearing a hat outdoors should be a rule. When teaching good health habits, what you do means a lot more than what you say. No one should lie out in the sun to get a tan.

Adults and kids need to make wearing sun-protective clothing as important as wearing a raincoat in

Sun Safety

by Claire Boiko

based on a scenario and songs by
Susan Boiko, MD, FAAD, FAAP

Children: You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.
You make me happy, when skies are gray.
You'll never know, Sun, how much I love you.
Please don't take my sunshine away.

Lifeguard: (*Blows whistle. Children sit up, at attention. Lifeguard addresses audience*) Good morning, boys and girls. You all know me. I'm a lifeguard. I watch over you when you go swimming in the pool or in the ocean. But I watch over more than your safety in the water. I watch over your safety in the sun. (*Points to children on stage*) These are my friends who will help me to teach you about sun safety. (*To onstage children*) What kind of things do you enjoy when the sun is shining brightly?

First Child: Swimming!

Second Child: Playing ball!

Third Child: Hiking!

Lifeguard: Those are wonderful things to do. But what happens when you stay out in the sun too long?

Fourth Child: You get red and sore. Ouch!

Fifth Child: You get all itchy and you peel. (*Scratches*) Yuck!

Sixth Child: Your skin gets dry and scaly like a lizard. Ugh!

Seventh Child: When you are older, you might even get skin cancer.

All Children: Ooh . . .

Lifeguard: That's right. (*To the audience*) Too much sun is not much fun. But we can help you get the most from those sunny summer days while protecting yourselves. Let's hear about the ABCs of sun care. (*To Alphabet Letters*) On stage, Letters. (*Blows whistle. Musical reprise of Alphabet Song as the seven letters take places center stage.*)

Music: *Alphabet Song.*

Alphabet Letters: (*In unison*) A, B, C, D, E, F, G — I won't let the sun burn me.

Letter A: "A" means away, I'll go inside. From hot burning rays I'll hide.

Letter B: "B" means block out harmful rays. Be very careful on hot days.

Both: A, B, C, D, E, F, G — I won't let the sun burn me.

Alphabet Letters: A, B, C, D, E, F, G — I won't let the sun burn me.

This play is available in its entirety by sending a self-addressed, stamped envelope (marked "Sharon/ Play") to Child Care Information Exchange, PO Box 2890, Redmond, WA 98073.

stormy weather. Special sun-blocking fabrics are now available. Some manufacturers sell a line of washable sun protective clothing that is both cool and effective. There may be others, but we know about at least two sources: Sun Precautions, (800) 882-7860, and Koala Konnection, (415) 988-9682.

The child care program staff can do their part, too. Arrange the schedule to avoid being outside in the midday sun. Put as much of the play area as possible into the shade and take regular shade breaks when children must play in the sun at any hour. Everyone should wear loose-fitting, cool clothing that covers as much of the skin as possible and sunglasses that block UVA and UVB rays.

To make using sunscreen easier, get parent permission to apply a single brand of the protecting product so

the program won't have to deal with as many bottles as there are children. If the program can't afford to buy the sunscreen, consider having parents contribute to a fund for the program to buy a supply in quantity. If parents must supply sunscreen bottles, be sure to request a product rated SPF 15 or higher.

In either case, you'll need parent consent and a responsible adult to apply the sunscreen. Have the consent state (a) the span of dates when the program will apply sunscreen to exposed skin, (b) that it will be reapplied after water play, and (c) the brand of the sunscreen the program will use. If local regulations require a doctor's written order to apply sunscreen, ask the program's health consultant or a health department physician to write the order for all the children as a group.

Use the clever play written by Dr. Boiko's mom with Dr. Boiko's songs and story ideas (a portion of this play is excerpted on page 87) to teach the children. Have the children teach their parents to keep themselves sun safe. Get feedback from the children, caregivers, and parents about what they learned and how they feel about the program. Evaluate the success of your efforts by whether there are fewer sunburns than before and no tans!

Susan S. Aronson, MD, FAAP, is professor of pediatrics and primary care pediatrician at St. Christopher's Primary Pediatric Practice at Hahnemann University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
