



ASK DR. SUE YOUR HEALTH AND SAFETY QUESTIONS



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## Sun Safety

People know about, but do not practice safe sun exposure for children or for themselves. A June 2002 report in *Pediatrics* found that by their teens, many children had had frequent sunburns and that many were getting burned to get tanned and failing to use well-publicized protective measures. Unprotected sun exposure during childhood contributes directly to lifetime skin cancer and skin aging — and it tends to be a lifelong habit. Limiting sun exposure during childhood and adolescence could reduce the lifetime risk of skin cancer.

Sun exposure is the major risk for development of both deadly melanoma and the more benign types of skin cancer.

Ultraviolet light does the damage — both UVA and UVB which penetrates the skin more and does more harm to the skin than UVA.

Inadequate protection from sun exposure puts many children at risk of skin cancer and avoidable premature skin including aging, wrinkles, and either excessive thinning or thickening of the skin. Unprotected exposure of the eyes to sunshine is very harmful. The front parts of the eyes absorb nearly all the ultraviolet light, contributing to development of cataracts later in life and other less common eye disorders. People with pale white skin are at greatest risk of skin cancer. *Even those people with very pigmented*

*skin who never get sunburned are at some risk.*



PHOTOGRAPH BY BONNIE NEUGEBAUER

### **Avoid Sun Exposure When You Can**

- Minimize exposure to the sun between 10 am and 3 pm. (Of course children need outdoor play during the midday, but they need maximum protection from the sun if you take them out in the sun during those hours.)
- Reduce the exposure of children to the sun's rays from reflecting surfaces such as sand, water, cement, and snow by shading the children while they play.
- Keep babies out of direct sun. The skin of children under 6 months of age is less able to resist sun damage.

### **Use Clothing and Cover**

- Wear protective clothing designed to shield from the sun. Protective clothing is made of tightly woven cloth that allows air circulation through vents or other design features. Ordinary clothing such as T-shirt material offers little protection. A hat with a 3-inch brim or more helps protect the face and neck. Baseball hats do not protect much more than the forehead, leaving cheeks, chin, and neck exposed. Some clothing manufacturers specialize in making sun-protective clothing that are usually more costly than what you might pick up at a sale somewhere. When weighing this cost against the benefit of sun protective clothing, think of the value of reducing the lifetime risks of sun damage.
- Use sunglasses that are labeled that they block 99% to 100% of UVA and UVB rays. Do not use those that just say they block UV light.

### **Smear Sun Protection Products on Exposed Skin**

- Use sunscreen or sunblock liberally on all exposed surfaces, including using a lip product with sun protection. Use sunscreen on the scalp of children who take their hats off. (After a few applications, they may decide wearing a hat is better.) Pick UVA and UVB absorbing or blocking products with SPF of 15 to 30, applying it thickly at least 30 minutes before going outside. Applying sunscreen can be a nice touching opportunity for teachers that does not need to be done for everyone at once, but can be spread out over a period of time while some of the children are involved in another activity. Reapply the sun protection product every two hours or after it might have been washed off by water or sweat.

Sun protection is for everyone. Teaching how to protect against sun damage is effective. In Australia, most children learn about sun protection during early childhood. Skin cancer deaths in that sunny country had been rising, but after the education programs were introduced, these deaths leveled off. For women, the rates went down (Giles, Armstrong, Burton, Staples, & Thursfeld, 1996).

In the United States, malignant melanoma is the seventh most common form of cancer (Rigel, Friedman, & Kopf, 1996). Teaching children how to protect themselves from sun injury should be a part of every early childhood curriculum. Consider using the *California Early Childhood Protection Curriculum* that you will find on the Internet at [www.dhs.ca.gov/cpns/](http://www.dhs.ca.gov/cpns/) to teach sun safety to children. On this web site, go to the Tools & Strategies section, then click on "Package" to access the curriculum, a printable poster of Alex the Alligator

(who is dressed with sun protection in mind), and Guidelines for Outdoor Play (a set of guidelines that directors will find easily converts to a child care center sun policy).

Limiting exposure of the skin and eyes to ultraviolet radiation significantly reduces the lifetime risk of sun damage. Teach and practice these three simple rules to protect against harmful sun exposure:

- Avoid sun exposure between 10 am and 3 pm when you can.
- Use clothing and shade to keep sun off the skin.
- Smear sun protection products on exposed skin 30 minutes before sun exposure.

Above all, remember that sun safety works — but only if you do it!

## References

- Geller, A., Colditz, G., Oliveria, S., Emmons, K., Jorgensen, C., Aweh, G., & Frazier, A. L. (2002). "Use of Sunscreen, Sunburning Rates, and Tanning Bed Use Among More than 10,000 US Children and Adolescents." *Pediatrics*, 109: 1009-1014.
- Giles, G., Armstrong, B., Burton, R., Staples, M., & Thursfield, V. (1996). "Has mortality from melanoma stopped rising?" Analysis of trends between 1931 and 1994. *Br Med J*, 312: 1121-1125.
- Rigel, D., Friedman, R., & Kopf, A. (1996). "The incidence of malignant melanoma in the United States: issues as we approach the 21st century." *J Am Acad Dermatol*, 34: 839-847.

 **it out: Access the California Early Childhood Protection Curriculum online: [www.dhs.ca.gov/cpns/](http://www.dhs.ca.gov/cpns/)**  
**Also, related articles on Sun Safety online: [www.ChildCareExchange.com](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com)**