

## “Sun-smart” Your Kids

### How much danger do children face from the sun?

Human exposure to increased Ultraviolet (UV) levels can result in more sunburns, premature skin aging, skin cancers, cataracts and other eye diseases. Some researchers have shown that exposure to UV radiation can also affect the immune system. The damage the sun causes to our skin adds up year after year. By the time we are adults, many of us will have soaked up more than enough ultraviolet rays to cause skin cancer. In fact, the incidence of skin cancer in the B.C. population has doubled in the last 15 years!

Much of our exposure to UV rays happens before we turn 18. And since the earth's ozone layer is getting thinner, even higher levels of UV radiation can be expected in the years ahead, even though efforts are being made by government agencies around the world to correct this problem.

What does this mean for our young people, who spend large amounts of time out in the sun, particularly during the hot days of summer?

The answer is simple: by protecting children from the sun, you can significantly reduce their chances of developing skin cancer.

### How can we protect children from sun exposure?

Keep unprotected toddlers and older children out of the sun during the peak hours of 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Try to make sure that their pre-school or school schedules keep them indoors as much as possible during these hours. Book sports and other outdoor activities for the safer times earlier in the morning or later in the afternoon. However, do not reduce their exercise.

Don't overlook natural shade. Is their play area in a shady spot? Are there trees or other shady areas that provide protection?

### What about clothing?

Encourage children to be “sun-smart”. Make sure they cover up with appropriate clothes. Closely-woven material offers natural protection from the sun. If *you* can see through it easily, then UV rays will be able to get through too. A long-sleeve shirt and pants are the best things to protect vulnerable skin. A broad-brimmed hat is also recommended: avoid baseball caps that don't shade the ears or back of the neck.

### How important is "sunscreen"?

Dermatologists strongly recommend that if you have to be out in the sun for any length of time (for shopping, running errands, etc) you should use a sunscreen lotion with an SPF (Sun Protection Factor) of 15 or more UVA protection. If you are going to spend the whole day out in the sun like at the beach or working outside, you and your children should use a sunscreen with an SPF factor of 30 or more and UVA protection. Look for products approved by the Canadian Dermatology Association.

For best results, sunscreen should be applied 15 to 30 minutes before exposure to the sun so it is absorbed by the skin and less likely to rub or wash off. Apply the lotion according to instructions and every couple of hours. Swimmers and those who sweat heavily should use a "waterproof" brand.

For children wearing bathing suits, make sure that sunscreen is applied up to and *under* the edges of the suit to protect sensitive areas like the upper thighs and chest. Pay particular attention to the tops of feet and the backs of the knees. Be careful when applying sunscreen near the eyes: these products can be irritating so avoid the upper and lower eyelids.

Babies are especially sensitive to UV radiation and heat. For these reasons, it is best to NOT expose babies less than one year of age to *any* intense, direct sunlight – for example, during the middle of the day.

Sunscreens, like many other products, have a limited shelf life and become less effective over time. Consumers should check the expiry date of their old sunscreen containers and replace them if they are out of date.

### What about sunglasses?

The same UV rays that harm the skin can also cause injury to the eyes, with infants and children being particularly susceptible to this kind of damage. Standards for sunglasses have improved dramatically in the last few years, and virtually all brands are effective at screening or reflecting ultraviolet light. Look for stickers that say the lenses provide a minimum of 90 per cent protection from UV-A and 95 per cent protection from UV-B light.

When buying sunglasses, see how well they cover the eyes. Large-size lenses, glasses that fit snugly, and a wraparound design all help cut down on damaging UV rays that can easily leak in around the edges of inappropriate or poorly fitting sun glasses.

Have your clear plastic or glass corrective lenses checked for UV protection. Most clear plastic corrective lenses block UV and to a lesser extent clear glass corrective lenses do as well.

### Other Dangers

Be extra careful with children who are fair-skinned or who have blond or red hair. They are more likely to burn easily and are therefore potentially most at risk of developing skin cancer later in life.

Most of the sun's damaging UV rays can penetrate light cloud cover and haze. So remember to protect children, even if there's light cloud cover and it doesn't feel hot.

Rays from the sun reflect off many of the surfaces around us. Up to 80 per cent of the sun's UV radiation can be reflected off snow. Concrete, sand and water reflect less than 20 per cent. Whether children are skiing, swimming, playing or walking, they always need to be "sun-smart".

### Tips to Increase Sun Safety

- Protect skin from the sun everyday from late spring through to early fall.
- Stay out of the sun from 11a.m. until 3p.m.
- Do NOT expose babies less than one year of age to *any* intense, direct sunlight (usually from 10a.m to 4p.m.).
- Wear long-sleeved shirts, pants, a hat and sunglasses.
- If you *have* to go out in the sun *without* protective clothing, use sunscreen liberally. And don't forget to apply it to ears, nose, and neck.
- Keep in mind that sunscreen is *not* intended to increase sun exposure time but to enhance protection during periods of unavoidable sun exposure.
- A tan does *not* provide adequate protection against the powerful rays of the sun. Actually, having a tan means that your skin is already damaged by UV radiation.
- Help teach children to be "sun-smart" and to protect themselves against a lifetime of exposure to the damaging rays of the sun.
- Indoor tanning, using sun lamps, will damage your skin the same way that UV from the sun does.



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