Frequently asked question about Sunscreen

Nearly all skin cancers are caused by ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun. Taking steps to reduce exposure to UV radiation will reduce the risk of developing skin cancer. Sunscreen reduces the amount of damaging UV radiation reaching your skin and the regular use of sunscreen can help reduce the risk of sunburn.

What is the best way to protect my skin?

It is important to use a combination of methods to protect your skin from UV radiation as sunscreen on its own is not enough!

Take five steps to protect your skin:

Slip on close-weave clothing that covers as much skin as possible.
Slop on SPF 30+, broad spectrum sunscreen.
Slap on a broad brimmed hat that protects your face, ears and neck.
Seek shade whenever possible but especially between 10am – 4pm.
Slide on close-fitting sunglasses that offer UV protection.

How does sunscreen work?

Sunscreen works by combining organic and inorganic active ingredients which can absorb UV radiation and/or reflect or scatter the UV rays away from your skin. No sunscreen provides 100% protection; some UV radiation will always reach the skin, damaging the cells below. This damage builds up over time and can increase your risk of skin cancer.

What's in sunscreen?

Sunscreen contains chemicals to filter UV radiation, as well as other ingredients and preservatives, moisturizers and fragrances.

There are two types of chemicals in sunscreen:

Chemical filters, which absorb UV radiation before it can cause skin damage.
Physical filters, which contain micro-fine particles that sit on the surface of the skin and act as a physical barrier.

Sunscreen can contain either chemical or physical filters, and may contain both. Chemicals in sunscreen are tested and approved as being safe, and there is no scientific evidence of health side effects from sunscreen.

What does broad-spectrum mean?

UV radiation comes in different wave-lengths: UVA, UVB and UVC. Both UVA and UVB contribute to sunburn, skin aging, eye damage, melanoma and other skin cancers. UVC rays remain in the stratosphere as they do not penetrate the ozone layer. Broad-spectrum sunscreens filter out some UVA radiation as well as UVB.

What do the SPF numbers mean?

SPF stands for 'sun protection factor' and measures how effectively the sunscreen formula limits skin exposure to UVB rays that burn the skin. A sunscreen is given an SPF number (of between 4 and 30+) after strict laboratory testing. The higher the SPF number, the more protection the sunscreen provides against sunburn.

Can sunscreen cause skin allergies?

Allergic reactions to sunscreen are usually caused by perfumes and/or preservatives in the product, not the chemicals that filter UV radiation. If you have an allergic reaction to a sunscreen, you should try another brand or speak to your doctor or pharmacist about choosing another product. Sunscreens that have titanium dioxide as the main agent are usually suitable for sensitive skin.

Should I use sunscreen on my baby or toddler?

It is best to protect your baby or toddler with hats, clothing, and the use of shade. Infants under the age of 6 months should **not** have sunscreen applied. When using sunscreen on older babies ensure that the product is designed for child use. Apply sunscreen to small exposed areas of the baby's skin that can't be covered with clothing. If your baby reacts to a sunscreen, try another product or talk to your baby's doctor.

Do expensive sunscreens give the best protection?

Any SPF 30+ broad spectrum sunscreen, if applied correctly, will give good protection. Some products work better for some people than others, so it is important to test a few products and find the one that works best for you.

How should I apply sunscreen?

First, look at the label and always follow the manufacturer's instructions. Also keep in mind:

- Sunscreen must be applied generously, rubbed in lightly and used with other forms of sun protection (shade, clothing, hats).
- Most people don't use enough sunscreen – You should be using a shot glass full of sunscreen for each application. On average you should be using a 4oz bottle of sunscreen per week.
- Apply sunscreen at least 20—30 minutes before going outside to allow it to bind to your skin for maximum effectiveness, and then reapply every 2 hours.

Can I get sun burnt when using sunscreen?

Yes! You can still get sun burnt using sunscreen by:

- Not using other sun protection measures (such as shade, clothing and hats)
- Not reapplying every 2 hours or when it has been washed or wiped off
- Not using enough sunscreen
- Using sunscreen that is expired or has been stored incorrectly (see below)

Does sunscreen prevent vitamin D production?

Sunscreens filter out most but not all UV radiation. If you have any concerns about vitamin D, talk to your doctor.

Is it ok to use sunscreen containing insect repellent?

Some sunscreens contain insect repellent called DEET. When using a sunscreen using DEET always use the manufacturer's instructions. Speak to you doctor about using a sunscreen containing DEET if you are pregnant or intend on using it on young children.

Does sunscreen expire?

Yes! Sunscreen must be labeled with an expiry date and storage instructions. Sunscreen won't work as well if it has passed its use-by date, or has been stored incorrectly, such as in the car or next to the pool. It's best to store sunscreen out of the sun and temperatures below 25°C.

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