

The skinny on skin cancer

As spring and summer come upon us, the return of the sun and days warm enough to enjoy it are a welcome sight. But we also greet this welcome event with some apprehension. After all we're bombarded by information regarding the harmful effects of the sun. From skin cancer to effects on our vision, there are warnings everywhere on how and why to avoid the sun.

But it is important that we understand the positive effects of the sun, as well. Sunlight is the driving force behind the natural production of Vitamin D, an important vitamin in the regulation of strong bones and muscles (among other health benefits). Sunlight is very important in our regulation of our sleep cycles. And lack of sunlight has been tied again and again to depression and other mood disorders, with quality of life studies showing a direct link between the amounts of sunlight older adults have exposure to and their quality of life.

So how do we balance the risks and benefits of sun exposure? Understanding some basic information regarding skin cancer risks and how to minimize them at the same time reaping the benefits of healthy sun exposure is the key. The following are some helpful hints:

- 1) Avoid sun exposure during periods of high UV radiation. The most dangerous time to receive direct sun exposure during the day is mid-day, between the hours of 11 AM and 3 PM. Choosing a shady space, wearing long sleeve shirt and long pants as well as wearing a wide brimmed hat, and assuring appropriate use of sunscreen especially during those hours are of the most importance.
- 2) Sunscreens (that block both UVA rays and UVB rays) should be at least SPF 15 and a lip screen agent should be applied, as well. The use of sunscreen under indirect sun exposure and during non-peak hours may not be as important, but is still recommended by most health prevention agencies. Whether sunscreens with SPF's above 30 for those with lower risk skin (mild to low risk of burning) is "overkill" or not is debatable.
- 3) Knowing the UV index for any given day helps. The National Weather service and the Environmental Protection Agency developed this scale as way to evaluate the risk of dangerous UV radiation for any given day in any given area of the country. This information is available on the Weather Channel and various Internet websites. A score of 0 is lowest risk and a score of 10+ is highest risk.
- 4) Wear sunglasses in the sunlight. This will help avoid exposure to radiation that promotes cataracts and other visual disturbances.
- 5) Understand that "tanning beds" do indeed contain UV radiation and represent a risk just as natural sunlight does.

So how do we get the sun we need for the benefits listed above? Well, most experts feel that 15 minutes three times a week of direct sun light at non-peak hours is the way to go. This would be exposure without sunscreen but with the least amount of risk and most

benefits. Also the use of “sun lights” that give important light exposure without the UV radiation can benefit the mood and sleep cycles, although it does not have beneficial effects on Vitamin D production.

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