

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS: SUN EXPOSURE

Question: When do I need to protect myself from sun exposure?

Answer: Any time the sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays are able to reach the earth, you need to protect yourself from excessive sun exposure. UV rays can cause skin damage during any season or temperature. The hours between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. during daylight saving time (9 a.m.–3 p.m. during standard time) are the most hazardous for UV exposure in the continental United States. UV radiation is highest during the late spring and early summer in North America.

Question: What exactly are “ultraviolet rays,” and how do they affect my health?

Answer: UV rays are a part of sunlight and are an invisible form of radiation. UV rays can penetrate and change the structure of skin cells. UV exposure appears to be the most important environmental factor in the development of skin cancer and a primary factor in the development of lip cancer.

Excessive and unprotected exposure to the sun can result in premature aging and undesirable changes in skin texture. Such exposure has been associated with various types of skin cancer, including melanoma, one of the most serious and deadly forms. UV rays also have been found to be associated with various eye conditions, such as cataracts.

Question: Does it matter what kind of sunscreen I use?

Answer: Sunscreens come in a variety of forms, such as lotions, gels, and sprays, so there are plenty of different options. There are also sunscreens made for specific purposes, such as for use on the scalp, sensitive skin, and babies. Regardless of the type of sunscreen you choose, be sure to use one that blocks both UVA and UVB rays, and that is rated at least Sun Protection Factor (SPF) 15.

Question: Do sunscreens need to be reapplied during the course of a day?

Answer: You should follow the manufacturer's directions about reapplication. Though recently developed sunscreens are more resistant to loss through sweating and getting wet than previous sunscreens were, you should still reapply frequently, especially during peak sun hours and after swimming or sweating.

Question: Will clothing help protect my skin? What styles give the best protection?

Answer: Clothing that covers your skin protects against the sun's UV rays. Loose-fitting long-sleeved shirts and long pants made from tightly woven fabric offer the best protection. Darker colors may offer more protection than lighter colors. Hats can also help shield your skin from the sun's UV rays. Choose a hat that provides shade for your face, ears, and the back of your neck.

Question: Are sunglasses an important part of my sun protection plan?

Answer: Yes. Sunglasses protect your eyes from UV rays and help reduce the risk of cataracts. They also protect the tender skin around your eyes from sun exposure. Sunglasses that block both UVA and UVB rays offer the best protection. The majority of sunglasses sold in the United States meet this standard. Wrap-around sunglasses work best because they block UV rays from the side.



Always discuss with your treating physician the preventive health care most appropriate for your needs and clinical condition. Information reprinted from Cigna HealthCare Well Being. Adapted from: CDC, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Division of Cancer Prevention and Control.

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