

Health Tips

from New London Hospital

The Sun & Skin Care

The sun is a wonderful part of our world, but it can be very damaging to your skin. The sun radiates light and part of that light consists of ultraviolet (UV) radiation. There are three types of UV radiation: UVA, UVB, and UVC. UVC is blocked by the ozone layer, but UVA and UVB reaches the earth and damages the skin. UVA and UVB rays cause sunburns, skin cancer, photoaging, wrinkling, and cataracts. Unprotected exposure to the sun can cause both sunburn and tans. While a sunburn is more damaging, even the UV light that causes a tan is a sign that enough UV light has reached the skin to kill some cells and damage others. Once you have a tan, you are not protected from the damaging effects of the UV light. Avoid tanning beds which can be as damaging or more damaging than outdoor sun exposure.

To protect your skin from the sun's harmful UV rays, consider staying out of direct sun during the strongest time of UV exposure (11 am to 2 pm), wear a broad-brimmed hat (2-3 inch brim is best), sun protective clothing, and sunglasses. Not all clothing blocks UV rays well. Consider buying a shirt that has an ultraviolet protection factor (UPF) rating. Where you can't cover your skin, use a sunscreen with an SPF of 30, which blocks 97% of UVB light. SPF ratings higher than 30 may sound useful, but those higher numbers don't make much difference compared with using a generous amount of sunscreen and reapplying sunscreen every two hours, especially when sweating or in the water. Make sure your sunscreen provides UVA protection. Sunscreen should be applied 30 minutes prior to exposure. Don't forget to apply sunscreen to lips, hands, ears, feet, and behind your neck. Also, remember to practice sun protection even during overcast weather. UV rays can still pass through the clouds and penetrate your skin.

If you have been sunburned, here are some ways to treat your skin: stay inside or in shaded areas; take a cool bath, and gently apply cool, wet compresses to the burn to relieve pain; apply a topical moisturizer to rehydrate skin and reduce swelling.

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A previously published version of this health tip contained some incorrect statements. Dr. McGinley-Smith has provided more accurate information for this version.

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