

Growing up in Pennsylvania, we had our share of cold and snowy days. So when temperatures turned and summer came around, we would head to the beach. Of course up North we call it “the shore” which is short for the New Jersey Shore, where most of us flocked to on the weekends or for family vacations. But if we weren’t at the shore we were outside in and around the pool, and like most people, we rarely thought about sunscreen or the harmful effects of sun exposure, an attitude that has only started to change in the last 10 to 15 years. Researchers believe that the field of skin cancer prevention is only about a generation old and still in its adolescence stage. We are just now paying more attention to our exposure and the harm it can cause.

With Memorial Day behind us and the unofficial start to summer, temperatures are climbing and most of us will start spending more time outside increasing our exposure to the sun. That’s why the first week of June is designated as Sun Safety Week. Since it's estimated that nearly 80% of lifetime sun exposure occurs by the age of 18, the time to instill sun safety habits is early—when lifestyle habits are just beginning to take shape.

The earth’s exposure to Ultraviolet radiation (UV) rays increases between 10 A.M. and 4 P.M., and peaks every day between 11 A.M. and 1 P.M.

There are three types of UV rays: UVA, UVB, and UVC. UVA, while less powerful than UVB, penetrates deeply into the skin and contributes to skin aging and wrinkling. UVB rays are the most powerful and the most dangerous, causing sunburns and skin cancer. Lethal UVC rays are completely absorbed by the ozone layer and do not reach earth.

The UV index helps forecast the amount of UV radiation reaching the earth’s surface at solar noon. This system of measurement ranges from 0 (low level) to 15 (dangerous level). The index depends on factors that include latitude, elevation, ozone, and local air pollution.

To block both UVA and UVB rays, it’s best to use broad-spectrum protection sunscreens that contain Avobenzone (Parsol® 1789), zinc oxide, or titanium dioxide. A sunscreen’s Sun Protection Factor (SPF) number indicates how powerful the sunscreen is in preventing sunburns. Adults should always use sunscreen with SPF 15 or higher, and children benefit from SPF 30 or higher. Remember, sunscreen works differently for everyone—fair-, red- and blond-haired people with freckles will burn much faster than people with dark hair, skin, and eyes.

Over one million new cases of skin cancer are diagnosed each year in the United States. Just one blistering sunburn during childhood can double the risk of certain skin cancers later in life. Even tanning is hazardous, as it can increase the number of moles and prematurely age the skin.

Consider these statistics and your own exposure risks to the sun’s harmful UV rays.

- You can sunburn even on a cloudy day!
- More than 90% of skin cancers occur on sun-exposed skin.
- On average, children get 3 times more exposure than adults!
- One blistering sunburn can double a child’s lifetime risk of developing skin cancer!

- Melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer, kills one person every hour!

So, what can you do to protect yourself and your family? Well the solutions are simple to talk about, however personal experience has shown me that they are much harder to follow. Here are some simple steps you can try to adopt, and the more they become a habit, the less you'll have to think about them.

- Use Sunscreen Year-Round – Even on cloudy days the sun can harm your skin.
- Avoid Reflective Surfaces – Concrete, sand and water reflect 85 to 90% of UV rays.
- Avoid Mid-Day Sun – This is when UV rays are at their most harmful.
- Wear Year-Round Protective Clothing – If you can't remember the sunscreen then protect your skin with dark, tightly woven clothes, a hat and sunglasses.
- Reapply sunscreen often – Especially after swimming or exercising.

For my June 12th article I will discuss the different types of skin cancer and their signs and symptoms, as well as more preventative measures. Until then, for more information on sun safety for you, your family, and your community, please visit www.sunsafetyalliance.org.

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