

Choosing best sunscreen for your family

By Sheri Pope

Did you know skin is the largest organ in the body? Skin holds body fluids in, thus preventing dehydration. Skin keeps microbes out, providing protection from infections. Your skin protects you. You should protect it.

The sun provides vitamin D and other benefits. However, it's important to limit exposure to harmful rays known as ultraviolet (UV) light to safeguard yourself from skin cancer. Everyone is at risk of developing skin cancer – fair-skinned people and people with deeper skin tone, young and old. Skin damage accumulates over time. The more burns, the more at risk you are.

We can reduce cancer risk by:

- Staying out of direct sunlight during the hottest part of the day.
- Wearing protective clothing.
- Applying sunscreen vigilantly. Reapply every couple of hours if you are getting wet or sweating.
- Using a foundation that contains sunscreen if you wear makeup.
- Keeping infants in the shade. Infants up to 6 months of age should not wear sunscreen, because infant skin is more sensitive than adult skin. Be sure babies are hydrated and are wearing protective clothing.
- Checking with your doctor about which sunscreens are safe to use if you are pregnant.
- Checking sunscreen expiration dates and replacing as needed.

There are two kinds of sunscreen, mineral and chemical. Minerals sit on top of the skin, reflecting the sun's rays. They can be less irritating to the skin and more moisturizing. The chemical sunscreen absorbs into the skin, then absorbs UV rays, and turns them to heat that is released from the body. Chemical sunscreens are more water resistant.

The level of sun protection factor (SPF) starts at 15, protecting against 93% of UVB rays. SPF 100 protects against 99%. Dermatologists recommend using a broad-spectrum sunscreen that contains a SPF of 30 or higher and protects against UVA and UVB rays. Ultraviolet A is associated with aging. Ultraviolet B damages skin cells, causing sunburn and may cause cataracts. Together, UVA and UVB can cause skin cancer.

Tanning beds cause the same skin damage as the sun.

Cloudy as well as sunny days call for sunscreen. If you are on a reflective surface like water or concrete, you should apply more sunscreen more frequently. Manufacturers can no longer advertise sunscreens as water proof or sweat proof, so reapply every couple of hours.

Most people don't use enough sunscreen. The "teaspoon and shot glass rule" recommends using one teaspoon of sunscreen to cover the face and neck, and enough sunscreen to fill a shot glass – approximately one ounce – to cover all other exposed areas.

Sunscreen comes in lotions, sticks and colorful options. Sprays are a convenient but not always effective. When using spray, be sure to use an adequate amount and rub it in instead of allowing it to sit on the skin. Sticks are good for sun protection for the face. Experts recommend cleaning the top layer of the stick to avoid bacteria developing over time.

Find the sunscreen that fits your needs to keep your family safe while enjoying the benefits of the sun.

Sheri Pope, a prevention health specialist at RiverStone Health, can be reached at publichealth@riverstonehealth.org.