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## Smart Sun Protection

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### Some Info About Our Friend the Sun

Sunlight is good in many ways. It provides natural lighting. It helps your body make Vitamin D. It dries off your clothing after a big downpour. However, sunlight can also be harmful, especially to the skin. Most of its harmful effects to the skin can be boiled down to two letters – **UV**, or **UltraViolet**. UV rays are part of the spectrum of light that the sun gives off. Infrared and visible light are two other types of rays. Although some UV rays are blocked by the earth's atmosphere, a lot of it makes its way to the surface. UVA and UVB are the two main types of UV rays which reach us. We now know that both UVA and UVB rays can contribute to the development of skin cancer in humans.

### Sun Protection is a Joint Effort

Sort of like our federal government, sun protection should consist of three parts working together toward a common goal: reducing the amount of UV radiation getting to the skin. These are:

- ❖ Avoidance
- ❖ Equipment
- ❖ Sunscreens

### Avoidance

The sun's rays are most powerful when the sun is directly overhead. Because of this, it is best to avoid the sun whenever possible during the middle of the day. Usually the worst times are from 10am to 3pm, but this can vary depending on the season. If you like to run or walk, try to do so in the early morning or late afternoon (or better yet, exercise at the gym).

Cloudy days are deceptively dangerous because UV light can still get through the cloud cover. Also, both water and snow can reflect UV light onto your skin, so be careful when you're boating or skiing.

### Equipment

Hats and other clothing can play a big role in sun protection. Solid-construction hats with wide brims offer the best protection. Baseball caps offer some protection, but not as much as you might think. Plenty of sun can still reach the ears and lower face. I see a lot of skin cancers in these locations. Same goes for straw hats – basic rule of thumb is if you can see light through it, don't count on it being effective.

Clothing can vary widely in its sun protection abilities based on the material, the weave, and other factors. A tight weave is more protective than a loose weave. Also, many fabrics allow more UV light to get through when wet. (Remember when you got sunburned despite wearing a t-shirt into the pool?) So it makes sense to change into a dry shirt if the one you're wearing gets wet.

There are many specialty clothing retailers who offer shirts, pants, jackets, etc. that are designed to provide a greater deal of UV protection. There is also a laundry additive (see my outside links page) that the manufacturer claims increases the UV protection of clothing washed with it.

## Sunscreens

My other article about sunscreens goes into greater detail about the different types that are available. Whichever sunscreen you use, however, keep in mind that sunscreens are not the end-all solution for sun protection. None of them block 100% of UV rays, so sunscreens are only a part of good sun protection behavior.

In order to be most effective, sunscreens should be applied liberally and frequently. Be sure to reapply sunscreen after any dunk in the water, as even the most water-resistant sunscreens will lose some effectiveness after contact with water.

I usually recommend that patients use two types of sunscreen. An SPF 15 sunscreen is great for everyday use, when you'll just be going to work or running errands. Some people ask why they need sunscreen on days they "won't be outside". Well, we're finding out that little bits of sun exposure spread throughout the day adds up, and can still lead to skin cancer in the long term. Many manufacturers are now combining sunscreens with moisturizers, so applying sunscreen can be as easy as applying your daily moisturizer.

On days that you will be outdoors for a longer time, you'll want to use a sunscreen with a higher SPF rating, such as 25-30. There does seem to be some added protection with the higher SPF's. They just tend to be a little heavier or thicker, which is why some people don't like them for everyday use.

## Other Tips

Start early! Evidence suggests that a lot of the sun damage we get as youngsters never really goes away. It just builds and builds on top of sun damage we get later in our lives. Bottom line - it's never too early to begin smart sun protection.

Use of tanning booths is not a good idea, as it can lead to skin cancer, wrinkling, and a George Hamilton-like look. A good alternative is sunless tanning lotions. Some of the earlier generations were less than perfect and led to a color best described as "carrot". However, manufacturers are making big strides in this area. Estee Lauder and Clinique make some good products. Also, I'm told that a product called *Endless Summer* made by Procter and Gamble contains a newer chemical which gives a more appealing color. Try these out!

I want to emphasize that smart sun protection doesn't mean shutting yourself in a cave for your whole life. Being active outdoors is a healthy and important part of daily life. It's really all about common sense. With good protection, your skin should last you a lifetime.