

Lifewire: Ultraviolet can be ultraviolent

by Anne Gilbert

Skin cancer is the most prevalent form of cancer in the United States. Ironically, it is also one of the easiest to prevent.

There are so many ways to avoid the damaging ultraviolet rays of the sun, but often, precautionary steps are not taken seriously until it is too late.

July is UV awareness month and experts want you to be aware of the dangerous affects of UV light, and what you can do to protect yourself.

Avoiding the sun by using tanning beds and heat lamps should not be viewed as a precautionary step. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, artificial UV rays can be just as dangerous.

The short-term effects of UV rays are sunburns and tans, but eventually constant exposure to the sun results in prematurely wrinkled skin, dark splotches called age spots, and skin cells that become cancerous because their DNA has been scrambled by powerful radiation.

There are two categories of skin cancers: melanomas and non-melanomas. Non-melanomas include basal and squamous cell cancers. These cancers generally form only on those parts of the body that are most regularly exposed to the sun, for example the hands or the ears. Non-melanomas rarely spread to other parts of the body.

Melanomas, however, start in the melanocyte cell, which controls the pigment in skin. These cancers are much more likely to spread. The American Cancer Society considers melanoma to be the most dangerous form of skin cancer and estimates that 60,000 people are diagnosed each year, causing several thousand deaths.

If caught in the early stages, all skin cancers are treatable and generally can be stopped. It is commonly known that individuals with lighter skin tones are at greater risk for skin cancer because they burn more easily. However, UV light can cause damage even when there is no sunburn.

It is not realistic to think you can or even should avoid all exposure to the sun. Some exposure to the sun is necessary to provide the body with Vitamin D, which is important for good health. However too much exposure creates problems.

The sun's rays are strongest during the middle part of the day from about 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. UV rays reflect off many surfaces, the glare is especially bad off of sand and snow. The rays can also pierce through water, so keep in mind you aren't safe even if you feel cool and wet.

UV light can go through clothing as well. Tightly woven fabrics keep out the most sunlight, but a standard light summer T-shirt actually provides less protection than sunscreen with a SPF of 15.

There are some companies in the United States that are beginning to make clothing specifically to ward off the sun's harmful rays. They are labeling their clothing with a UPF (Ultraviolet Protection Factor). Perhaps UPF clothing is the way of the future. In the meantime it's best to lather on the sunscreen, or stay in the shade.

SUN VS. EYES: SUN WINS

Ultraviolet rays are known to be harmful to our skin, but according to the American Cancer Society the rays can also have a very damaging effect on our eyes. The best defense is to wear sunglasses that will block almost 100 percent of the UVA and UVB rays.

One hundred percent protection does not mean the glasses have to be expensive. Many inexpensive glasses meet the same requirements. Look for labels that say, "UV absorption up to 400nm" for 100 percent protection, or "Meets ANSI (American National Standards Institute) UV requirements" for 99 percent protection. If the label says "cosmetic" then only 70 percent of ultraviolet rays will be blocked from your eyes.

Wrap around lenses are the most effective for guarding the eyes and the sensitive skin around the eyes from all the angles of the light. Wearing a hat with a wide brim can further protect your eyes from direct rays. Unprotected eyes can lead to cataracts and damaged vision over the years.

The summer months bring many opportunities for fun in the sun, but also require a greater awareness of how damaging ultraviolet rays can be to our skin and eyes.

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