

Focus on Safety: Fun in the Sun – Be Aware! Summer is around the corner and sunny days are already here (well, for most of the country). Long hours of sunlight and the warm weather make it ideal for many of us to enjoy the outdoors and get involved with such fun activities as going to the beach, camping, hiking or just lazing on a sunny afternoon. The sun's rays make us feel good, and in the short term, make us look good. But our love affair isn't a two way street. Exposure to sun causes many negative effects: some are merely aesthetic, such as wrinkles and age spots on our faces, while other consequences are much more severe and therefore, we need to protect ourselves from the damages and diseases from which the sun's rays may cause. The fact is, sun exposure causes many of the skin changes that we think of as a normal part of aging. Over time, the sun's ultraviolet (UV) light damages the fibers in the skin called elastin. When these fibers break down, the skin begins to sag, stretch, and lose its ability to go back into place. The skin also bruises and tears more easily -- taking longer to heal. So while sun damage to the skin may not be apparent when you're young, it will definitely show later in life. We often associate a glowing complexion with good health, but skin color obtained from being in the sun – or in a tanning booth – actually accelerates the effects of aging and increases your risk for developing skin cancer. Yes, aside from the fact that over exposure to the Sun's rays can cause our skin to lose resiliency and to age quicker, they can cause Pre-cancerous (actinic keratosis) and cancerous (basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma, and melanoma) skin lesions. Skin cancer is the most prevalent form of all cancers in the U.S. and the number of cases continues to rise. It is the uncontrolled growth of abnormal skin cells, resulting in tumors, which are either benign (noncancerous) or malignant (cancerous). There are three main types of skin cancer: basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma and melanoma. Basal cell and squamous cell cancers are less serious types and make up 95% of all skin cancers. Also referred to as non-melanoma skin cancers, they are highly curable when treated early. Melanoma, a disease that is associated with our skin pigment cells called melanocytes, is the most serious form of skin cancer and causes 75% of all skin cancer deaths. Left untreated, it can spread to other organs and is difficult to control.

Follow these tips to help prevent sun-related skin problems:

- Apply sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 30 or greater at least 30 minutes before sun exposure and then every few hours thereafter.
- Select cosmetic products and contact lenses that offer UV protection.
- Wear sunglasses with total UV protection.
- Wear wide-brimmed hats, long sleeved shirts, and pants.
- Avoid direct sun exposure as much as possible during peak UV radiation hours between 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m.
- Perform skin self-exams regularly to become familiar with existing growths and to notice any changes or new growths.

- Eighty percent of a person's lifetime sun exposure is acquired before age 18. Therefore, if you have children, be a good role model and foster skin cancer prevention habits in your child.

- Avoid tanning beds.

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