

## Update Your Sun Protection Habits—Most Americans Make Painful Mistakes

The vast majority of skin cancers are preventable by routinely shielding your skin from the sun's damaging ultraviolet (UV) rays. Yet the majority of Americans aren't doing enough to protect themselves. They only use sunscreen at the pool, or forget to reapply, or forget about hats, long-sleeved shirts, and the cool relief of shade. Bring your sun-protection habits up to date--and learn why your favorite cotton T-shirt is one of the least protective garments to bring along for a day at the beach.

### The Spring Skin Check

Dermatologists recommend doing a skin check monthly, so you'll be more likely to notice small changes or even find a skin cancer when it's still small. If you haven't picked up this habit, this spring is the time to start as sunshine lures you outdoors. People with darker skin tones, such as African-Americans, need to check their palms, fingernails and feet carefully.

The best time to examine your skin is after a shower or bath. Check yourself in a well-lighted room using both a full-length mirror, and a hand-held mirror. Become familiar with your birthmarks, moles and blemishes so that you know what they usually look like and then can easily identify any changes they undergo. Signs to look for are changes in size, texture, shape, and color of blemishes or a sore that does not heal. If you find any changes, see your doctor or health care provider. Also, during regular checkups, ask your doctor to check your skin.

### ABCD Rule to Check Moles and Birthmarks

The ABCD rule is a convenient guide to the usual signs of melanoma. Be on the lookout and notify your doctor about any changes in the following factors:

- ◆ A is for **ASYMMETRY**: Half of a mole or birthmark does not match the other.
- ◆ B is for **BORDER**: The edges are irregular, ragged, notched, or blurred.
- ◆ C is for **COLOR** The color is not the same all over, but may have differing shades of brown or black, sometimes with patches of red, white, or blue.
- ◆ D is for **DIAMETER**: The area is larger than 6 millimeters (about ¼ inch -- the size of a pencil eraser) or is growing larger.

The most important warning sign for skin cancer is a spot on the skin that is changing in size, shape, or color over a period of one month to one or two years.

### Four Ways to Protect Your Skin

"Slip! Slop! Slap! ... and Wrap" is a catch phrase for kids that works well for adults too. It reminds people to use four key methods to protect themselves. Slip on a shirt, slop on sunscreen, slap on a hat, and wrap on sunglasses to protect the eyes and sensitive skin around them from ultraviolet light.

### Tips for Correct Use of Sunscreen

For maximum effectiveness, apply sunscreen 20 to 30 minutes before going outside. Be generous in the amount you use and use a product with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 15 or higher. A palm-full of sunscreen should be used to cover the arms, legs, neck, and face of the average adult. Less is needed for a child. For best results, most sunscreens need to be reapplied every two hours and immediately after swimming or sweating heavily. Remember that sunscreen usually rubs off when you towel yourself dry.

### Summer Shirts Put to the Test

The sun's ultraviolet radiation, both UVA and UVB, easily shines through some clothing and may contribute to later development of skin cancer—even without short-term symptoms like a visible sunburn. UV damage is cumulative, which means every sunburn adds to previous sun damage that remains in deeper layers of skin.

The sun protective value of clothing styles generally follows the type of fabric used to make them, and of course, how much skin they cover. Two popular summer shirts were compared with one made of a sun-protective fabric in scientific experiments using UV radiation at Morehouse School of Medicine in Atlanta, Georgia.

The tests found that cotton camp shirts and polo shirts provided little more protection than bare skin, while the sun-protective fabric completely blocked damaging UV rays.

Sun-blocking clothes sold in catalogues and at sporting goods stores are one solution—look for a minimum Ultraviolet Protective Factor (UPF) of 15. For very good protection choose UPF 25-39 and try UPF 40-50 for excellent sun protection. The following tips can make the clothes you already own give you better protection:

- ◆ Choose 100% polyester items for a day in the sun.
- ◆ Wear dark clothing instead of white. Dark colors provide five times more protection than white because the dye absorbs UV rays.
- ◆ Choose clothes of tightly woven fabrics. Check the weave by seeing how much light comes through the fabric when held up to a window or light.
- ◆ Wear long sleeves, long pants, long skirts such as a sarong, and shirts with collars and high necklines. More summer clothing is available in these styles, made of ultra-light weight fabrics with small inserts of mesh fabric to keep cool.
- ◆ Stay loose. The folds in loose clothing double the fabric's sun protection.
- ◆ Put on dry clothes or cover up after swimming.
- ◆ Consider using a laundry additive now available that gives clothing a sun protective factor of 15, which is supposed to last as long as the clothes.