



## Check and Protect Your Skin

### Update Your Sun Safety Habits

The vast majority of skin cancers are preventable by routinely shielding your skin from the sun's damaging ultraviolet (UV) rays. Yet most 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.



### The Spring Skin Check

Dermatologists recommend doing a **skin check** monthly, so you'll be more likely to notice any 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. Be sure to examine your palms, fingernails and feet when you do your skin check. About half of all melanomas in African Americans occur in these areas, as do 10% of those in whites.

The best time to examine your skin is after a shower or bath, when your skin is clean and you're already naked. 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. That way you'll be able to identify any changes more easily. Look for any changes in size, texture, shape, and color of blemishes, or a sore that does not heal. Get your spouse or partner to help you check those hard-to-see places. If you find anything that looks different, see your doctor or health care provider. Also, ask your doctor to check your skin during regular checkups.

### ABCD Rule to Check Moles and Birthmarks

The ABCD rule is a convenient guide to the usual signs of melanoma. Here's what you should be on the lookout for:

- **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) across, or the area has been growing.

Other important signs of melanoma include changes in size, shape, or color of a mole or the appearance of a new spot. Some melanomas do not fit the ABCD rule described above, so it is very important for you to notice changes in skin markings or new spots on your skin.

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 1 month to 1 or 2 years.

## **Four Ways to Protect Your Skin**

"Slip! Stop! Slap! ... and Wrap" is a catch phrase for kids that works well for adults too. It reminds people of the 4 key methods they can use 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 enough to cover the arms, legs, neck, and face of an average adult. Less is needed for a child. For best results, most sunscreens need to be reapplied every 2 hours and immediately after swimming or sweating heavily. Remember that sunscreen usually rubs off when you towel yourself dry.

### **The UV Index (Sunny Day Forecast)**

The UV Index, on a scale from 1-11+, measures the amount of ultraviolet radiation reaching the ground during an hour around 12:00 noon each day. There's a daily UV forecast for 58 cities, based on local conditions, which many newspapers and TV stations report. By using a ZIP code search, you can get the forecast for even more communities.

The higher the number on the scale, the greater the exposure to UV radiation. On a typical sunny spring day, the UV index will rise to high (8,9, 10) or very high (11+). For a fair-skinned person, sun damage can begin in 15 minutes without skin protection on a high-UV day.

### **Beyond Sunscreen**

Seeking shade, wearing tightly-woven clothing, and avoiding the intense sun from 10 am to 4 pm are excellent ways to protect yourself from damaging UV rays and skin cancer.

Some people think about sun protection only when they are planning to spend a full day at the beach or pool. But sun exposure happens whenever you are in the sun -- gardening, fishing, hiking, riding a bike, going to the zoo, attending a baseball game, or going to and from your car. Remember that the damage adds up day after day, so it's important for you to take precautions to protect your skin day after day.

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