



MOST SUNSCREENS CAN STOP THE BURN, NOT SKIN CANCER

By Linda A. Johnson

Think slapping on the highest-number sunscreen at the beach or pool will spare you skin cancer and premature wrinkles? Probably not, if you're in the sun a lot.

That's because you don't need a sunburn to suffer the effects that can cause various types of skin cancer.

Sunscreens generally do a good job filtering out the ultraviolet rays that cause sunburn - UVB rays. But with sunburn protection, many people get a false sense of security that keeps them under the harsh sun much longer. That adds to the risk of eventual skin cancer - both deadly melanoma and the more common and less-threatening basal and squamous cell cancers.

Experts say the best protection is a sunscreen that includes zinc oxide, titanium dioxide or avobenzone. Consumers should also look for those that are water-resistant and have an SPF of 30 or better, indicating strong protection against UVB rays, and apply liberally and often.

False sense of security

More importantly, limit time in the sun, particularly from 10am to 4pm, and cover up, including wearing a hat and sunglasses.

"I don't think people understand they're only getting protection from part of the spectrum," says Dr Sandra Read, a spokesperson for the American Academy of Dermatology. "You're accumulating this damage and you don't know it."

Many sunscreens say little about when to reapply - doctors say at least every two hours and after swimming or sweating. Nor do they say much about how much to use, roughly two tablespoons for an adult.

"Most people who use an SPF 15 get the protection equivalent to an SPF 5 because they put it on too thinly," says Dr Martin Weinstock, chairperson of the American Cancer Society's skin cancer advisory group and a Brown University professor.

While a higher SPF number means more protection, the difference is small: SPF 15 blocks about 93 percent of UVB rays and SPF 50, often more expensive, blocks about 98 percent.

Risk of skin cancer

Most sunscreens work by reacting chemically with the skin, so they don't start absorbing damaging rays right away and must be applied 30 minutes before going outside, something many labels fail to note.

Still, doctors say people shouldn't abandon sunscreen altogether: they probably should use more, even on a cloudy day.

ON THE WEB . . .

American Cancer Society
www.cancer.org

Skin Cancer Foundation
www.skincancer.org