

## Sun Protection for Children

- Would you send a child out in the rain without a raincoat or an umbrella?
- Would you send a child to play in the snow without gloves or boots?
- Would you send a child out in the sun without sunscreen and a hat?

If you said no to each question, you are well aware of the importance of protecting children from the outdoor elements. If you said *yes* to the last question about the sun, think again.

Playing in the sun is a fun outdoor activity for children. But, the sun can be dangerous. Recent medical research shows it is important to protect children from overexposure to the sun. Skin damage is cumulative — adds up over a lifetime — and starts with that first sun exposure.

It is estimated that 80% of lifetime sun exposure occurs before the age of 18. Sun protection with regular use of sunblock with an SPF (Sun Protection Factor) of 15 or higher during the first 18 years of life can lower the risk of certain skin cancers by 78%.

The two types of ultraviolet sunlight that can damage the skin are Ultraviolet A and Ultraviolet B rays. UVA rays are the slow-tanning rays that penetrate deep into the skin and age the skin prematurely. UVB rays cause burning of the skin and are considered the major cause of skin cancer.

Young children are dependent on adults to take the appropriate precautions in providing sun protection. As a parent of a young child, there are several precautions you can take to help protect children from future health problems related to the sun.

Follow these simple guidelines to help minimize the risks of excessive sun exposure.

- **Keep children out of the midday sun from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.** (daylight savings time 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.). This is the time when the sun's rays are the strongest. If outside activities are held between these times, play in a shaded area. Sit or play in the shade, especially when your shadow is shorter than you are tall.
- **Use a sunscreen.** Before your child goes outside, apply a sunscreen with an SPF 15 or higher. The protective ability of sunscreen is



Block  
That Sun!  
Children get 3  
times more sun  
exposure than  
adults.

rated by SPF - the higher the SPF, the stronger the protection. SPF numbers indicate the length of time one can spend in the sun without risk of burning. When using an SPF 15 sunscreen, a fair-skinned person who normally sunburns in 20 minutes of midday sun exposure may tolerate 15 times 20 minutes (300 minutes) without burning. Apply as much sunscreen as you would a lotion for dry skin. Spread it evenly over all uncovered skin, including ears and lips, but avoiding eyelids. Apply sunscreen about 30 minutes before sun exposure. Reapply sunscreen every two hours and after swimming or excessive sweating. Teach children to use a sunscreen regularly, like they use a toothbrush and toothpaste.

- **Wear a hat.** Help your child find a hat with a wide-brim that protects the eyes, ears, face and back of the neck. Have your child shop with you to find a hat the child will enjoy wearing.
- **Wear sunglasses.** Sunglasses that block ultraviolet rays greatly reduce sun exposure, protecting the eyes and eyelids.
- **Wear protective clothing.** Loose-fitting clothes that are tightly woven are a good choice.
- **Be aware of ground surfaces.** Ground surfaces such as sand, cement and white painted surfaces reflect the sun's rays. In the water, ultraviolet light penetrates three feet deep. Summertime is not the only time of the year children need to be protected from the sun. Snow reflects from 80 to 90 percent of the sun's rays. The sun's damaging effects are increased by reflection from water, white sand, and snow.
- **Practice the "shadow rule."** Look for shade when your shadow is shorter than you are tall. Teach children the *ABC's for Fun in the Sun*.
  - A** is for *away*. Let children know about staying away from the sun in the middle of the day.

**B** is for *block*. Encourage children to use a sun protective factor (SPF) of 15 or higher sunscreen.

**C** is for *cover up*. Wear a shirt and a hat.

**S** is for *speak out*. Have children talk to family and friends about sun protection.

Avoid sunburn. It may take only 15 minutes of midday summer sun to burn a fair-skinned person. These include children who are fair-skinned, with light, red, or light-brown hair; blue, green or gray eyes.

Since parents and child-care workers become role models to children, they need to set an example and follow the sun protection guidelines.

**Sources:**

- Parents' guide to sun protection for children.* (1993). American Academy of Dermatology. Retrieved March 10, 2003, from <http://www.aad.org/pamphlets/ABCsFunSun.html>
- Tondl, R. M. (1997). *Sun protection guide for children.* Nebraska Cooperative Extension.



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