

# SKIN CANCER PREVENTION (SUN PROTECTION): WHAT A CHILD CARE PROVIDER NEEDS TO KNOW



## WHY PROTECT AGAINST EXCESSIVE EXPOSURE TO SUNLIGHT?

Sunshine is both friend and foe. The sun provides light, warmth, and is essential for growth and development of all living things. Unfortunately, excessive sun exposure can cause blistering sunburns, premature aging (wrinkles and blotches), cataracts, a weakened immune system, and skin cancer. (A cataract is a loss of transparency in the lens of the eye that clouds vision.)

Sunlight is believed to cause 80 to 90 percent of all skin cancer. The number of skin cancer cases has dramatically risen, especially in the last two to three decades. This increase has resulted from these and other factors:

- Increased leisure time devoted to outdoor activities.
- Decrease in the amount (coverage) of clothing worn.
- Decreasing amounts of stratospheric ozone which partially protects the earth's surface from receiving cancer producing ultraviolet (UV) radiation, principally from the sun.

## SKIN CANCER TYPES

There are actually over 200 types of skin cancer. The three major forms are basal cell carcinoma (BCC), squamous cell carcinoma (SCC), and the deadliest form - malignant melanoma. Skin cancer can develop anywhere on the body but most often appears on surfaces receiving the greatest amount of sunshine.

Malignant melanoma is the most serious form of skin cancer. It often arises from or near a mole. There are four basic warning signs that should prompt individuals to visit their physician (especially a dermatologist). Examine moles or growths for:

- **ASYMMETRY:** a line drawn through the mole produces two halves that do not match.
- **BORDER:** the border of the mole has an irregular shape or notched (jagged) edges.
- **COLOR:** the color is not uniform but has a mixture or "bleeding" of colors such as black, brown, red, blue, etc.
- **DIAMETER:** the diameter (distance across) is larger than a standard pencil eraser.

## MORE HAZARDS FROM TOO MUCH SUNLIGHT

Since sun exposure is understood to be the major cause of skin cancer, it is extremely important to protect children and youth from too much sunshine. This caution is reinforced by the fact that up to 80 percent of an individual's lifetime contact with sunshine occurs before adulthood (at least for children who, as adults, acquire indoor occupations). A teacher or parent's efforts to help children adopt sun-safe behaviors are much preferred to treating skin cancer later in life. The sun's role in skin cancer, results from its emission of invisible UV light, which includes UVA and UVB. These two sectors of UV light enter the skin cells causing both visible and invisible injuries.

Sunburn is an example of visible injury. Childhood sunburns likely increase the risk that children will get melanoma in adulthood. Less well known is that tanning is actually an outward sign of internal damage as the body desperately tries to protect itself. Unfortunately, a tan offers inadequate protection against future solar assault.

Source: Adapted from California Early Childhood Sun Protection Curriculum- Alex the Alligator  
[http://www.dhs.ca.gov/ps/cdic/cpns/skin/images/skin\\_sunproteccurriculum.pdf](http://www.dhs.ca.gov/ps/cdic/cpns/skin/images/skin_sunproteccurriculum.pdf)

## HIGH RISK CONDITIONS FOR UV EXPOSURE

UV rays linked to skin cancer development are more intense (destructive) under certain timeframes or conditions (usually related to the sun's angle to the earth and/or the depth of atmosphere through which the sun's rays must pass):

- 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
- Mid-spring through mid-fall.
- Geographical latitudes nearer the equator (like Australia).
- Higher altitudes (mountainous regions).
- Absent thick cloud cover.

Individuals must also understand that tanning parlors, sun lamps, and sun beds emit UV radiation that is often more damaging than natural sunlight. Remember there is no safe tan!

## PERSONAL HIGH RISK FACTORS FOR SKIN CANCER

Skin cancer can afflict any person regardless of skin color. Individuals most likely to get skin cancer tend to have some of these characteristics:

- Fair skin
- Blue, green, or hazel eyes
- Light-colored hair (non-black)
- Freckles
- Tendency to burn rather than tan
- History of severe sunburns
- Have many moles (especially over 100)
- Personal or family history of skin cancer

Many medications also increase a person's sensitivity to light (therefore the risk of skin cancer). Some common examples include Aleve, Advil, Motrin, and Tetracycline to name a few. Read the medicine label or ask your pharmacist or doctor about your situation.

## HOW TO PROTECT PEOPLE FROM GETTING SKIN CANCER

Here are the basic strategies to shield children (and adults) from excessive sun exposure:

- Wear tightly-woven, loose-fitting clothing that covers as much of the body as possible.
- Wear a wide-brimmed hat (four-inch brims) that produces a shadow which covers the eyes, ears, nose, face, and back of neck.
- Use sunglasses that include a warranty stating that they provide at least 95 percent UVA and UVB (broad-spectrum) protection.
- Reduce sun exposure from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., when UV rays are strongest. (This is especially important from mid-spring through mid-fall.)
- Find shade (trees, physical structures) to shield you, especially from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
- Liberally apply sunscreen to exposed skin 30 minutes before venturing outdoors. The sunscreen container should have a sun protection factor (SPF) rating of 15 or above and should state that it has broad-spectrum (UVA and UVB) protection. PABA-free sunscreens are recommended for persons with sensitive skin. Depending on outdoor conditions, sunscreen should be re-applied at least every two hours.

## WARNING!

Don't depend on sunscreens alone to protect children and adults from skin cancer. Instead, rely as much as possible on a combination of all the guidelines just listed.

Please note that the SPF number tells how many times longer (under ideal conditions) a person can stay out in the sun without beginning to turn red in comparison with the amount of time totally unprotected skin would start to burn. Research indicates these numbers are sometimes overstated.

Finally, the good news is that most skin cancer can be successfully treated if detected in its earlier phases. Of course the best "treatment," as always, is PREVENTION. Your instruction can help children to grow up skin cancer free. Good luck!