



Sun Protection

a year-round issue in Utah

by Lori K.E. Ramirez, M.D.

Though we are in the middle of winter, the sun's rays are still very strong. The sun's intensity is largely due to the high elevation where we live. Here, at the foot of the Rocky Mountains, we need to protect ourselves from the sun year round.

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18

Spending time on the ski slopes is very popular. Many people may not realize that the snow reflects 80 percent of ultraviolet light. They can easily cause painful winter sunburns. I would like to emphasize the importance of sunscreens and protective clothing.

It is easy to believe that most of our lifetime exposure to sunlight occurs

before the age of 18. Studies have shown that parents who start applying sunscreen to their kids at an early age are more likely to see them continue this practice as young adults.

Because I am a dermatologist, patients and acquaintances frequently ask me about sunscreens and how to use them. Here are a few of the most common questions.

WHAT TYPES OF SUNSCREEN SHOULD I USE?

Physical sunblocks, such as lotions and ointments containing Zinc Oxide and Titanium Dioxide, are the best sunscreen because they form an actual barrier that protects and shields your skin. They protect against the damaging effects of both UVA and UVB rays, and they eliminate the worry of applying potentially absorbed chemicals. (See side-effects section below.)

When considering chemical-based sunscreens, look for the ingredients avobenzone (Parsol 1789) and methylantranilate, because they have the broadest UV coverage. Ecamsule (Mexoryl SX), a component of the more recently FDA approved sunscreens, is also a good choice.

You can apply physical sunblock lotions immediately before stepping outdoors. However, it is important to remember to apply chemical sunscreens at least 30 minutes prior to going outside, or they will not be effective.

WHAT SPF DO YOU RECOMMENDED?

A sunscreen with an SPF of at least 30 should be used every day—regardless if the sun is out or not. UV light can still penetrate through clouds and do its subtle damage, so protection should be a daily issue just like brushing your teeth or combing your hair. An SPF 30 sunscreen filters 96 percent of the sun's rays when applied appropriately. This should give sufficient coverage.

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30

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HOW MUCH SUNSCREEN SHOULD I USE?

You should be very generous when applying sunscreens. Most people don't apply enough, and they get weak sun protection. A good rule of thumb is that an average-sized adult needs a one-ounce shot glass of sunscreen to cover the whole body. In addition, remember that sunscreen lasts only two hours. You should reapply it, regardless of the weather, when you are outdoors.

It is also important to remember that snow and water reflect the UV light, increasing the risk of sunburn; so don't forget to protect your skin—even when you are just playing briefly on the slopes or at the lake.

Spray sunscreens are a nice alternative to cream-based sunscreen because they are quick and easy to use. However, spray sunscreens are not good for the initial application because it is difficult to see areas you miss.

When applied correctly, SPF 30 sunscreen filters

96

percent of the sun's rays

DOES NORMAL CLOTHING COVER ENOUGH?

Ultraviolet protection factor, or UPF, for clothing is similar to sunscreen SPF. It indicates the UV protection of fabrics, with higher UPF numbers providing more protection. While a cotton T-shirt offers physical protection, it only has a UPF of five.

To improve your apparel's UPF, use an additive like SunGuard detergent to do your laundry. It will give your clothing a UPF upgrade from five to 30. In addition, the color of fabrics influences extent of UPF. Darker colors block more UV light providing more skin protection.

ARE THERE SIDE EFFECTS FROM SUNSCREENS?

There are minimal side effects from sunscreens. Parents are occasionally concerned that higher SPF concentrations translate to higher side effect risks. However, these concerns appear to be unproven.

Today's sunscreen users rarely complain of the itching or irritation. In past, the common ingredient para-aminobenzoic acid, or PABA, used to bother some people's skin. Newer compounds are tolerated fairly well.

It is important to note that the sunscreen safety has not been evaluated in infants less than 6 months of age. For this age group, the best UV protection is avoiding the sun. If sun exposure is inevitable, use clothing with UPF of 30 or more, and apply sunscreen to exposed skin.

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