

Protecting Your Skin

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Director of Mayo Executive Health Program, Michael A. Covalciuc, M.D., M.P.H, discusses protection from sun exposure.



Exposure to the sun, with rare exceptions, is a daily occurrence living in Arizona. Sun damage causes acceleration of aging and changes of the skin including wrinkles and alterations in pigment, in addition to 80 percent of all skin cancers. Protecting skin from sun exposure is the most effective method for preventing the development of skin cancer.

The greatest sun damage occurs between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., when the sun's rays are strongest. The sun produces both visible and invisible rays known as ultraviolet light. Ultraviolet A (UVA) and Ultraviolet B (UVB) are responsible for most sun damage. Limiting exposure during peak times, staying in the shade and using sun-protective clothing are helpful strategies. The sun's rays still penetrate clothing, and clothing that is stretched or wet loses some of its effectiveness. Color-free dyes are available in laundry products to add sun protection to regular clothing.

The backbone of sun protection is the avoidance of peak sun hours and wearing sun-protective clothing. A helpful but incomplete method of protection is the regular use of sunscreens. A full-spectrum sunscreen protects from both UVA (deeper damage) and UVB (sunburn). Sunscreens are rated by a sun protection factor (SPF), which is how long it takes the sun to burn skin that is covered with the product. Sunscreens protect your skin by absorbing, reflecting or scattering the sun's rays depending on the particular product that is used.

In choosing a sunscreen, pick one that is a water-resistant, full-spectrum version of SPF 15 or more. Apply the sunscreen liberally over all exposed areas of the body, and reapply at least every two hours when outdoors and after swimming or excessive sweating. Take extra caution around reflective surfaces like water, snow or sand. It's important to remember that sunscreens are not perfect and should be used in conjunction with other sun-protective measures including sun-protective clothing like hats, long sleeves and long pants or skirts.

Starting effective sun protection now will dramatically reduce the risk for development of skin cancer. Even if you've had large amounts of sun years ago, it's never too late to start sensible sun protection efforts today while still enjoying the beautiful Arizona weather. For further information, discuss with your physician or consult a reliable source like the American Academy of Dermatology's Web site, www.aad.org.

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Have a health question for Dr. Covalciuc at Mayo Clinic? Send it to editors@azfoothills.com.