

DARK SIDE OF THE SUN

Gorgeous weather beckons, but it poses cancer, wrinkle risks

By Jeff Favre



Southern Californians tend to brag about the weather to friends and family throughout the rest of the country — proud of those summers filled with cloudless, beach-friendly days and mostly moderate temperatures.

But even the sunniest of settings have their shady sides — sun burn, premature wrinkles, enhanced potential for skin cancer.

Looking only at the dark side of things, you might become afraid to even sit near an open window — let alone venture outside for a swim or a hike. But fortunately, for every potential pitfall there is an answer, according to Torrance's Dr. Susan Goodlerner, a board certified dermatologist and associate professor of dermatology at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center.

“The key element in summer is sun protection, and with a lot of sunscreens on the market it's difficult to know which one to pick,” Goodlerner said. “Many people don't know what the SPF number actually means.

“The important thing to look for is an ingredient that protects against both UVB and UVA rays with a SPF of at least 30,” she said. “There are several ingredients you can use. I often recommend one with zinc oxide.”

Though it's common for people to pull the sunscreen from the medicine cabinet once summer arrives, the American Academy of Dermatology advises wearing sunscreen every day of the year, on any part of your body not protected by clothing, if you are outside for any time at all.

Even in cloudy weather, up to 80 percent of the sun's ultraviolet rays can reach you. And if you are at the beach, sand reflects the sun, hitting you with a 25 percent greater force.

Most people don't wear enough sunscreen, according to the academy, which recommends an ounce per usage reapplied every two hours if you remain in the sun, more frequently if you are in the water. It's important not to forget a sun-blocking lip balm. And if possible, limit your time outside between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.

Those who forgo the sunscreen regimen are at a much greater risk of developing skin cancer, including melanoma, which kills more than 8,000 Americans annually, according to the academy. A periodic self-exam is recommended for everyone, and those with dark moles should have regular checkups with a dermatologist.

Even if you don't wind up with cancer, sunburn can cause wrinkles and premature aging to our largest organ (yes, skin is an organ).

If your skin is already suffering the harsh effects of the sun, there's some help. Mild sunburns can be treated by over-the-counter creams, though more severe damage may require a prescription-strength antibiotic.

"Applying ice is helpful, and so is aspirin, to block some of the stinging," Goodlerner said.

If your complexion is getting a touch leathery, the most successful remedies are topical antioxidants.

"There have been some studies that show good reversal in sun damage with topical Vitamin C," Goodlerner said. "Or there's Vitamin C plus Vitamin E, and other combinations of antioxidants.

"A powerful antioxidant that has proven to be effective is idebenone, which is sold under the name Prevage, or Prevage MD, which is prescription strength," she said.

Prevage runs about \$175 for 1.7 ounces. The same dollar amount could likely keep you in sunscreen for years.

To further your protection, there are also several lines of clothes and hats that protect against UVA and UVB rays.

Now you're ready to face the sun, so to speak. But what about the other summer dangers for the skin?

With the heat comes sweat, and with sweat comes tinea pedis and tinea cruris, known in less scientific circles as athlete's foot and jock itch, respectively. Both are fungal infections that cause itching and burning.

Though both are rarely serious, they can severely limit outdoor fun. Over-the-counter powders and creams tend to be effective in treating the conditions, Goodlerner said.

It may sound frightening, but by following simple guidelines, summer in Southern Californian can, indeed, be sunny fun.

Many people assume that when it comes to sunscreen, the trick is to pick one with a high SPF number, because it provides more protection than a lower SPF.

But that's not the whole story.

SPF — Sun Protection Factor — is the measuring stick for how well a substance blocks UVB rays, the ultraviolet rays from the sun that cause burning.

The number system works like this: SPF is calculated by measuring how long it takes someone with no protection to receive a sunburn, and then how long it takes the same person to burn with the sunscreen.

For example, if it takes 10 minutes to sunburn your bare skin, and the product you use keeps you from burning for 20 minutes, then it's rated SPF 2. An SPF of 15 means instead of 20 minutes it would take 150 minutes.

Of course, this assumes you are wearing enough sun-screen, that you waited 20 to 30 minutes before going into the sun after the application, and that you continue to apply sun-screen every two hours, or every 30 to 45 minutes if you are in the water — even if the product says it is water-resistant.

But SPF doesn't factor into UVA rays, which is a known contributor to skin cancer. So it's important to use a broad-spectrum sunscreen, which protects against both UVA and UVB rays.

The ingredients to look for in a broad-spectrum sunscreen include titanium dioxide, zinc oxide, oxybenzone and octyl methoxycinnamate. Zinc oxide now can be purchased in a clear form instead of the thick, white cream that once was associated with lifeguards.

No sunscreen blocks out all UV rays, so it's still best to cover up as much as you can, avoid too much sunlight between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., and find shade whenever possible.