

Protecting Your Skin from the Sun

Ever wondered when (or why) a tan became a popular skin enhancement? Many sources report that ever since style icon Coco Chanel declared tanning "in" in the 1920s, sun-kissed skin was seen as symbol of health, youth and social status. But recent studies on the relationship between the sun's ultraviolet rays and our skin are changing the way we view that "youthful" glow.

As summer approaches and jeans and turtlenecks are swapped for swimsuits and tank tops, it's important to remember that protecting your skin against the sun's harmful rays is the best way to prevent cancer and other skin-related diseases. The American Academy of Dermatology released this staggering statistic; one in five Americans will develop some form of skin cancer during their lifetime. The sun's rays have long-term effects, too. The National Institute on Aging credits prolonged sun exposure for wrinkles, dryness and age spots.

So, what exactly causes your skin to darken under the sunlight? The Skin Cancer Foundation explains that tanning is caused by the skin's exposure to ultraviolet rays. When skin is exposed to these rays, cells called *melanocytes* produce the brown pigment *melanin*, which darkens the cells of the *epidermis* (skin). Ironically, the darkening of the skin isn't to enhance your looks, it's your body's way of protecting you from further UV damage, including sunburn, freckles and cancer.

The most serious type of skin cancer is melanoma. This form of cancer starts in the melanocytes. When people spend extended periods of time in the sun without proper skin protection, melanocytes can grow abnormally and become cancerous. Warning signs include moles, open sores or crusty bumps. It's important to become familiar with the marks on your skin and perform regular skin examinations. If you notice anything irregular, notify your doctor immediately.

It's important to understand the consequences of unsafe sun exposure. Knowing that you are the only one who can protect your skin should empower you to keep it safe! As the body's largest organ, it's important to keep it healthy by wearing sunscreen, lip balm and protective clothing. WebMD provides these helpful tips on properly braving the elements:

- Apply sunscreen with an SPF 15 or higher 15 to 30 minutes before going outdoors. Lather on enough so that it takes a full minute to rub in.
- If at the beach, spread at least 1 ounce – enough to fill a shot glass – on your face and entire body.
- If you swim, sweat or are outdoors for a long time, reapply every two hours. Also, choose a sunscreen that is water resistant and provides a broad-spectrum protection.
- If possible, avoid direct sunlight between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.

But take note: it's not just your skin that needs protecting. Excessive UV exposure also can damage your eyes, including cataracts and macular degeneration. WebMD advises the use of sunglasses that offer UV 400 protection, which means the glasses block up to 400 nanometers of harmful UV light.