

Patient information

Protecting your skin from the sun

This leaflet offers simple tips on protecting yourself from the harmful effects of too much sun.

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Know what sunlight can do

The sun gives out ultraviolet (UV) radiation made up of UVA, UVB and UVC rays, which vary in strength. Your skin uses UV rays to produce vitamin D, which is essential for healthy bones.

Oily fish is the only other really good source of vitamin D. But too much sun is harmful. It can damage your eyes and skin, and increase the risk of skin cancer. More than 8 out of 10 cases of melanoma, the most serious type of skin cancer, could be prevented by enjoying the sun safely and avoiding sunburn.

Some people are more at risk because their skin is particularly sensitive to the sun, including babies and young children. Certain illnesses and medicines make you more sensitive to UV radiation, especially if they affect your immune system.

Cover up

Wear loose fitting clothes that cover your skin. That means long-sleeved tops, trousers and long skirts. A wide-brimmed hat will protect your face, neck and ears.

Dark-coloured, close-weave fabric gives better protection. Hold clothes up to the light to see how much sunlight gets through.

You can also buy clothing – including swimming costumes and beach wear – labelled with an ultraviolet protection factor (UPF). The higher the UPF value the better. Look for UPF 40 or more.

Wear decent sunglasses

Your eyes can get sunburn too, both from direct sunlight and UV rays reflecting off surfaces such as snow, water or sand. Your eyes may become painful and swollen. Long-term over-exposure to UVB rays means you risk developing cataracts that damage your sight.

Choose well-fitting sunglasses that have 100% UVA and UVB protection. Wear them even when the sun does not seem that bright. Wraparounds offer the best protection.

Spend time in the shade

Check the UV index (UVI) shown on weather reports when planning outdoor activities. This tells you how strong the UV radiation is. You will need sun protection if the UVI is three or above. Take special care when the sun is at its strongest. This is between 10am and 3pm in the UK.

Use sunscreen

Look for a high 'sun protection factor' (SPF) when you're choosing sunscreen. An SPF of 30 or more will protect you against UVB. Pick a sunscreen that clearly says it will also protect you against UVA. It will have a UVA circle logo and a UVA rating of four or five stars.

Check your current sunscreen's use-by date. Most sunscreens have a shelf life of up to three years and will last 12 to 18 months after opening.

Apply plenty of sunscreen to exposed skin 15–30 minutes before you go out in the sun so it is properly absorbed. Be careful not to miss bits like the back and sides of your neck and your forehead. Put on other things like make-up, moisturiser or insect repellent afterwards.

Reapply sunscreen every two hours, or more often after you've been swimming or if you've sweated a lot while exercising or working outdoors. 'Water resistant' sunscreens come off when you towel dry.

No sunscreen provides total protection from UV light. You should also cover up and stay in the shade to avoid damage to your skin.

Fake tan products, even if they contain sunscreen, give you little protection. 'Tan injections' that change your skin colour are unlicensed and illegal in the UK.

Avoid sunbeds and sunlamps

These give out artificial UVA and UVB radiation. Using them is as risky as sunbathing. The law in England and Scotland is that you can't use a sunbed if you're under 18.

Check for changes

Regularly check any moles you have for changes that could be a sign of skin cancer. If a mole gets bigger, changes colour or shape, is painful, itchy or inflamed, get it examined by a healthcare professional. Speak to your doctor if you notice a sore area of skin that itches, hurts or bleeds and doesn't heal within four weeks.

Don't avoid the sun altogether

Exposure to small amounts of sunlight without wearing sunscreen helps you produce the vitamin D your body needs. Judging how much is enough will depend on where you are, the time of year and time of day, and your skin type. Little and often is best. Between March and October, around 10–15 minutes in the midday sun, with forearms, hands or lower legs uncovered, is usually enough to get the vitamin D you need. Don't let your skin redden – this is a sign you have had too much sun.

Lack of sunshine in the UK means a fifth of adults and up to a quarter of children may not get enough vitamin D, especially in the winter. Vitamin D deficiency can result in soft bones and a lack of calcium.

People who have little or no exposure to the sun are at particular risk. Perhaps they are stuck indoors for long periods (for example at a desk job with long hours), have extremely sensitive skin or cover their skin for cultural reasons. People in these groups may want to get their vitamin D levels checked, and will benefit from taking vitamin D supplements.

In fact, Public Health England recommends that everyone should consider taking a daily supplement containing 10 micrograms of vitamin D, particularly in autumn and winter. Speak to your GP or a pharmacist before taking any vitamin D supplements. They can also advise what foods provide vitamin D.