

## &gt;&gt; LIFE

# Wake up, brush teeth, apply sunscreen

Labels are confusing, but there are rules of thumb for sunblock

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Like barbecues and smog alerts, sunscreen is synonymous with summer. And slathering it on before heading outdoors has become as routine as fastening your seat-belt.

But when it comes to choosing sun protection products, things aren't quite so simple. First there are the acronyms to sort out: SPF; UVB and UVA. Then there are the shelves of lotions, creams and sprays to wade through, the long lists of ingredients, and claims ranging from "sweatproof," to "waterproof" to "broad spectrum."

Some of the confusion has been addressed this year with new rules from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) that make it easier to compare products. Health Canada is currently reviewing its label standards and similar changes are expected here in the next year or two. In the meantime, manufacturers can label their products ac-

ording to FDA rules as long as they also meet Canadian criteria.

Dermatologists say the first thing to remember, regardless of what brand you buy, is to use it. "Make it a habit, just like brushing your teeth," advises Dr. Benjamin Barankin, medical director and founder of the Toronto Dermatology Centre and a board member of the Canadian Dermatology Association.

As products and standards evolve, it can be hard to know what to look for in a product. But here are things to bear in mind this summer:

➤ Choose a sunscreen labelled "broad spectrum," indicating it protects against both ultraviolet A and ultraviolet B radiation. Sunscreens offer good protection against UVB rays that cause sunburn and can lead to skin cancer, but until recently have not addressed cancer-causing UVA rays, which penetrate more deeply and cause aging. The FDA now requires any product described as broad spectrum to pass tests ensuring certain levels of protection for both. These standards aren't yet in place in Canada.

➤ Use a minimum of SPF (sun protection factor) 30, which means it will prevent burning for 30 times longer than if you wore no protec-

tion. SPF only measures UVB protection. The FDA proposes capping SPF levels at 50-plus and argues anything higher isn't that much more effective. But Barankin says until Canadian rules are in place, it may be more prudent to choose SPF of 45 or 60 because they tend to provide higher UVA protection.

➤ Lotion, cream, gel or spray? Some experts debate the merits of each and are wary of spray because people tend not to use enough. But Barankin says choose what you like, because then you'll use it. Lotions may be the best option for those with oily skin, while cream is better for dry or older skin. Beware of inhaling spray and don't spray directly on your face; instead spray on hands and apply to face.

➤ Use enough. You've heard advice on using a shotglass full or a golf-ball-sized amount. Barankin keeps it even simpler. Studies show the average person uses a third to half of what they actually need. His solution: apply sunscreen the way you normally do; then repeat.

➤ Don't forget to reapply. Claims like sweatproof and waterproof are unproven and have been replaced by "water-resistant" in the U.S. Dermatologists recommend putting

another layer of protection every two to three hours and after you sweat or go swimming.

➤ Read the ingredients. Dermatologists say look for avobenzone and mexoryl, chemicals that offer broad spectrum protection. Zinc oxide and titanium dioxide are physical blocks that aren't absorbed by the skin and are preferred by people wary of chemicals. Groups like Environmental Defence in Canada and the Environmental Working Group in the U.S. warn sunscreen chemicals like oxybenzone and retinyl palmitate (a form of Vitamin A) are linked to hormone disruption, allergies and cancer, though dermatologists say they are safe.

➤ Take Vitamin D. You can get it from the sun and there's been some worry that sunscreen will deprive people of the important vitamin. But incidental sun exposure (doing errands, driving) without protection often provides enough in summer. Health Canada and physicians also recommend Vitamin D supplements.

➤ Use other protection. Even more effective than sunscreen are wide-brimmed hats, shade, clothing and avoiding the sun when it is strongest in the middle of the day.

## SUNSCREEN TERMS

**UVB:** Ultraviolet B radiation, the rays that sunscreens traditionally protected against, causes sunburns and can lead to skin cancer.

**UVA:** Ultra-violet A rays penetrate deeper into skin to cause cancer.

**Broad spectrum:** Look for this on the label because it means the product includes both UVA and UVB protection.

**SPF:** The "sun protection factor" indicates how long it takes to burn skin once lotion is applied as compared to unprotected skin. An SPF of 30 (the recommended minimum) would protect skin roughly 30 times longer, although the time of year, time of day and skin type must also be considered.

**Avobenzone, mexoryl, oxybenzone, retinyl palmitate:** Common chemical ingredients considered safe by the Canadian Dermatology Association but which have come under scrutiny by environmental groups who warn of links to hormone disruption and allergies.

**Titanium dioxide, zinc oxide:** Mineral ingredients that act as physical blocks that aren't absorbed by the skin.