

# Sun protection:

## Looking out for little kids and educating big kids

By Dr. Denise Wexler



### Sun safety can be fun

#### Make kids the timekeepers:

- Set an alarm.
- When it beeps, it is time to slap on more sunscreen (one tablespoon every two hours for a child).

#### Practice the shadow test:

- When your shadow is shorter than you, stay out of the sun.
- When your shadow is longer than you, go out and have fun!

#### And always:

- Try to plan activities outside of peak hours (11 a.m. to 4 p.m.), when the sun's radiation is strongest.
- Wear wide-brimmed hats, sunglasses and appropriate clothing to protect skin from the sun.
- Apply enough sunscreen.

Speak to your family physician or pharmacist about oral supplements of vitamin D as they are a safer alternative.

When the weather is warm and the sun is shining, kids want to be outside running around and having a good time. As parents, it is important we make sure they are properly protected from the harmful effects of UV radiation. Committing to simple proactive steps today can extend your child's adult life.

Children are susceptible to UV radiation because their skin is thinner and more sensitive than that of adults, and they don't yet have a skin protection system. A young child has more skin (relative to body mass) than an adult, so sunburn is far more serious. Babies burn even more easily and should be kept out of the sun. Contact a pediatrician immediately if a child younger than one year is sunburnt—in severe cases, this is an emergency. In fact, severe blistering sunburns before the age of 18 years can significantly increase a person's lifetime risk of developing skin cancer.

**Research shows that Canadians born in the 1990s have a two to three times higher lifetime risk of developing skin cancer (a one in six lifetime risk) than those born in the 1960s (one in 20). And one blistering sunburn early in life doubles the risk of developing melanoma later in life.**

Skin cancer develops through repeated exposure to UV radiation and is therefore extremely rare in children. Yet according to research by the Canadian Cancer Society, more than 35 cases have been reported in the last 15 years.

To protect children from the

dangers of excessive UV radiation exposure and the risk of developing skin cancer later in life, it is important to adopt good sun-safety habits early. A broad-spectrum sunscreen (minimum SPF 30) should be applied and reapplied every two hours while a child is outside, and children should wear wide-brimmed hats, 100 per cent UV-protective sunglasses and loose-fitting, tightly woven clothing to shelter their skin from the sun.

Before your kids head outside to play, think about these numbers:

- More than 90 per cent of UV radiation can penetrate light clouds, mist and fog.
- UV radiation is reflected or scattered to varying extents by different surfaces. For example, snow and concrete can reflect as much as 80 per cent of UV radiation, dry beach sand about 15 per cent and sea foam around 25 per cent.
- Even in water, at a depth of half a metre, UV radiation is still 40 per cent as intense as at the surface.
- Shade can reduce UV radiation by 50 per cent or more.

Teaching your children diligent sun-safety habits now will serve them well through the rest of their lives. Remember, these are learned behaviours—so set the example and make proper sun protection part of your everyday routine for all family members! **CS**

*Denise Wexler, MD, FRCPC, is a dermatologist in London, Ontario, and President of the Canadian Dermatology Association.*