



Today's Parent

Family sunscreen safety

We eagerly await summer, then spend it trying to avoid sun damage. Here's how to enjoy the season safely.

May 17, 2013 Lia Grainger



Photo: OJO Images/Johnner

Sharon Aschaiek's six-year-old son's fair skin couldn't handle very much sun. When the Thornhill, Ont., family was on vacation in the Dominican Republic, Aschaiek was extra careful, keeping Jaiden in the shade when the midday sun was hottest and **applying sunscreen** every hour. But late one afternoon, Aschaiek let Jaiden play outside for half an hour without a fresh application. "It was nearing sunset, and we'd been putting sunscreen on him all day," says Aschaiek. Yet, in that 30 minutes, Jaiden got a burn. "It just reinforced how sensitive he is," says Aschaiek, and how careful they have to be.

Summer is a time for outdoor play. Whether at a cottage, a festival, the beach or the backyard, your family can catch some vitamin D-soaked rays in the coming months. But be warned: Skin cancer is the most common type of cancer in Canada. Even one blistering sunburn in the first 15 years of a person's life can more than double the chance of melanoma — the deadliest type of skin cancer — down the road.

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Everybody burns

“It’s not true that only fair-skinned people are at risk for burns and cancer,” says Gillian Bromfield. As the director of cancer control policy at the Canadian Cancer Society’s national office in Toronto, Bromfield is used to dispelling myths about the sun and cancer. She explains that darker skin contains more melanin, which offers some protection from a small amount of ultraviolet (UV) damage, but not from sunburns, or the risk of developing a malignancy. That being said, sun exposure is especially dangerous for children with moles or freckles, very fair hair and skin, or a family history of skin cancer.

The sun emits UVA and UVB rays, both of which can be harmful to skin, but in different ways. UVA rays can travel through lightly woven clothing, and glass that doesn’t have UV coating, to penetrate deeply below the skin’s surface and cause irreversible problems and premature aging. UVB rays are the ones responsible for surface sunburns. Both types cause skin cancer. Bromfield warns that it’s not just sunburns that are dangerous. “Tanning is an indication of damaged skin,” she explains. “Sun exposure — whether you burn or not — increases your risk of skin cancer.”

Sunscreen savvy

Most experts don’t recommend sunscreen for infants younger than six months. The lotion is meant to work with the skin, and an infant’s skin is too sensitive for sunscreen to be effective, no matter how high the sun protection factor (SPF). “Their skin simply cannot protect itself from the sun,” says Bromfield. Babies also have thinner skin and a higher surface-area-to-body-weight ratio, which makes them more susceptible to absorbing chemicals found in sunscreen, or having an allergic reaction. Keep babies in the shade instead, or covered with long-sleeved, light-coloured, densely woven clothing.

As kids get older, it’s time to get them accustomed to putting on sunscreen, and often. The Canadian Cancer Society recommends using a sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher, labelled “broad spectrum,” which means it protects from both UVA and UVB rays. It should be generously applied everywhere that will be exposed to the sun at least 20 minutes before going outside. Reapply every two hours, and if your kids are swimming or playing in the water, use a waterproof sunscreen and reapply once they towel off.

In a much-publicized 2010 report, the non-profit American watchdog Environmental Working Group (EWG) made controversial claims about sunscreen, specifically, that common ingredients could be carcinogenic, cause DNA damage leading to cancer, or cross the placenta and affect the developing fetus. The American Skin Cancer Foundation quickly refuted the claims, saying they were based on “junk science” — primarily studies conducted on mice instead of humans. Anatoli Freidman, Toronto dermatologist and medical director of the Toronto Dermatology Centre, says the claims are controversial. “There is no evidence that sunscreen leads to any health issues,” he says. “Sunscreen has been around for many years, without any evidence of harm. The benefits outweigh the risks.” For a list of EWG’s recommended sunscreen choices, visit ewg.org/sunscreen, or talk to your family physician.

Beyond lotion

“One of our main messages is that sunscreen is a very important tool, but it’s only one of the tools,” says Bromfield. It’s a message that Aschalek has taken to heart. She has Jaiden wear a brimmed hat that shields his face, ears and neck from the sun, and a protective shirt — both approaches recommended by the Canadian Dermatology Association. Covering up with clothing is generally better than any sunscreen, but keep in mind

that wet cloth can lose up to half of its UV protection, so keeping kids dry when they aren't in the water is important. Sunglasses that block both types of UV rays, which can cause eye damage, are also a great addition to your arsenal.

Read more: [Fun and safe sunglasses for kids](#)>

Sometimes only shade will do; Aschaiek brings a children's play tent to the beach to give Jaiden a little bit of respite from the sun. Bromfield says that sun safety is a lesson best learned young, and the most effective way to teach your kids is to set a good example. "Parent modelling has been shown to be very influential on a child's behaviour," she says. "If you're applying sunscreen to them, apply it to yourself. If they need a hat, you probably need one, too."

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