

PATIENT EDUCATION HANDOUT

Sunscreen Utilization and Protection

Molly Boyko, OMS-IV; Stephanie McDonald, OMS-IV
Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine–Carolinas Campus, Spartanburg, SC

Lindsay Tjiattas-Saleski, DO, MBA, FACOEP, FACFP, Associate Editor



If there was a way to protect yourself from the most common cancer in the United States, would you do it?

Knowledge about skin cancer and its prevention is one of the most powerful tools to protect yourself from it. The largest organ in the body is the skin, which functions in many ways to protect us from the outside world. It creates a barrier to shield us from infection, injury, dehydration, and more.

The skin has several layers: the epidermis, dermis, and subcutaneous tissue. Cells that make up the epidermis, the most superficial layer of skin, are vulnerable to damage. These cells are called squamous cells, basal cells, and melanocytes. When skin cells are damaged, they can lead to skin cancers such as squamous cell carcinoma, basal cell carcinoma, and melanoma.

WHAT CAN CAUSE SKIN CELL DAMAGE?

Exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation increases the risk of developing skin cancer. UV radiation is a type of energy that comes from the sun. It is made up of UVA and UVB rays. UVA rays have been associated with skin aging, while UVB rays can cause the skin to burn. Tanning beds and sun lamps also emit UV radiation. Exposure to UV radiation is the single most modifiable factor that you can adjust to protect yourself. Other risk factors for skin damage include things like having a fair complexion or having many moles, but these are unmodifiable.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO PREVENT SKIN CANCER?

There are many behavioral changes one can make to decrease the risk of acquiring skin cancer. These changes include wearing sunscreen, UV protective clothing made of a tightly woven fabric, a wide-brimmed hat, and sunglasses.

If you are interested in getting some sun, there is a safe way to do it. Dermatologists recommend using a broad-spectrum—at least 30 SPF—waterproof sunscreen. Both UVA and UVB rays can cause skin cancer, which is why it is important to use a broad-spectrum sunscreen that covers both types. It is also helpful to seek shade when possible, along with avoiding times of peak sunlight from 10 am to 2 pm.

HOW OFTEN SHOULD YOU USE SUNSCREEN?

Sunscreen should be used daily on the face, neck, and body. About 1 oz should be used to cover the entire body; this is equivalent to one shot glass. Sunscreen should also be used in the winter to protect against UVA.

HOW SHOULD YOU APPLY SUNSCREEN?

Sunscreen should be applied evenly onto the skin using gentle circular motions 15 to 30 minutes before sun exposure. If the sunscreen is a spray formula, it can be sprayed onto the skin, then rubbed in. Be sure to apply sunscreen to the face, torso, arms, legs, neck, back of the hands, hairline, ears, scalp, and other overlooked places. The lips can also be protected from the sun using a lip balm containing SPF.

SOURCES

1. National Cancer Institute. Skin cancer prevention (PDQ)—patient version. <https://www.cancer.gov/types/skin/patient/skin-prevention-pdq>. Accessed June 5, 2023.
2. National Center for Biotechnology Information. Bookshelf. Skin cancer. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK247163/>. Accessed June 5, 2023.
3. American Academy of Dermatology. Sunscreen FAQs. <https://www.aad.org/media/stats-sunscreen>. Accessed June 5, 2023.
4. American Academy of Dermatology. Cold weather and the skin. <https://www.aad.org/public/everyday-care/sun-protection/shade-clothing-sunscreen/cold-weather>. Accessed June 5, 2023.

DOWNLOAD AND DISTRIBUTE

The PDF of this patient education handout is available for easy download and distribution to your patients at www.acofp.org/PEH.