

# Screen out skin cancer by taking precautions during summer

BY MEG NUGENT

STAR-LEDGER STAFF

If you routinely keep a bottle of sunscreen in your medicine chest, you're warming the hearts of skin care experts who have invested countless hours warning patients about the dangers of too much unprotected fun in the sun.

But say you're an avid sun lover and you still have a lot of sunscreen sloshing around in that very same bottle by summer's end. Chances are you're not using this most common form of sun protection in a way that will effectively slash your vulnerability to the ravages of skin cancer and premature aging.

The best way to avoid skin cancer is to stay out of the sun because overexposure to sunlight - and that includes practices such as tanning - is the main cause of skin cancer, according to the American Academy of Dermatology. This is especially true if time in the sun results in blistering and sunburn.

"Skin cancer is not confusing at all. It's caused by ultra-violet radiation. End of discussion," said dermatologist James Spencer, vice chairman of the Department of Dermatology at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in Manhattan. But statistics show the prudent path isn't the one a big chunk of the American public wants to follow when it comes to sun worship. "The incidence of skin cancer is dramatically rising," said Montclair skin surgeon Stephen Spates, despite years of repeated warnings and urgings about the dangers of overexposure to the sun from the likes of the American Cancer Society and the Academy of Dermatology.

The American Cancer Society estimates that more than 1 million new cases of skin cancer will be diagnosed in the United States this year. It is also estimated there will be a 4 percent jump this year, to 95,880, in the number of new cases of melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer.

In addition, patients diagnosed with skin cancer in the past several years have tended to be on the young side. "What I'm seeing in my practice are younger and younger people with skin cancer. This really has been a disease of senior citizens, people in their 60s and 70s. I'm seeing people in their 20s," said Spencer.

And teenagers are increasingly flocking to tanning salons, Spencer said. "Tanning is in."

"The reason why we're still seeing people laying out there with baby oil on is that, culturally, we associate sun exposure with health and vitality and being attractive," said Spates.

Spencer links the increasing skin cancer rates to a rise in "intentional tanning."

"I bet your grandmother didn't put on baby oil and lie in a bikini by the pool. There's much more intentional tanning now," he said. "You can go to the Caribbean, you can go to an indoor tanning salon."

Dermatologists know it's futile to advise their patients to avoid the sun entirely. "I think nothing feels better than being on a beach all day or out on a boat all day. I think it's natural to want to get that high," said Spates.

"I don't want to deprive people of the things they love to do. I just think people need to make an effort to do it more wisely, especially people we know who are at risk."



Eileen Rappoport of Morristown applies sunblock to her niece, Lisa Benzaia of Blairstown, while they wait to see Oprah Winfrey at an event in Liberty State Park, Jersey City.

## 3 types of skin cancer

**Basal cell carcinoma:** Usually appears as a small, fleshy bump or nodule, most often on the head, neck and hands. May occasionally appear on the trunk as red patches. Seldom occurs in African-Americans, but is the most common skin cancer found on fair-skinned people. Basal cell cancers don't spread quickly. Untreated, this cancer will begin to bleed, crust over and heal, then the cycle repeats. Rarely metastasizes, but it can extend below the skin to the bone and cause considerable damage.

**Squamous cell carcinoma:** May appear as a bump or a red, scaly patch. The second most common skin cancer found in fair-skinned people. Typically found on the rim of the ear, the face, lips and mouth. Can develop into large masses and can metastasize.

**Melanoma:** The most deadly of all skin cancers, but it's almost always curable when detected in the early stages. May appear without warning. It also can begin in or near a mole or another dark spot in the skin. Any moles that are changing in appearance should be examined by a dermatologist, so that any early melanoma can be removed while still in the curable stage. Excessive sun exposure, especially sunburn, is the most important, preventable cause of melanoma.

Source: *The American Academy of Dermatology*

Doing it more wisely, of course, means taking those simple steps many of us have been well schooled on to prevent too much sun: wearing a broad-brimmed hat, sunglasses, tightly woven, darker clothing, restricting outdoor activities when the sun is at its most intense (11 a.m. to 3 p.m.) and, yes, folks, using plenty of sunscreen, which works by reflecting, absorbing or scattering the sun's rays on the skin.

While we buy a ton of skin-care products - about \$400 million worth of the most protective ones - dermatologists, in general, claim that people blow it when it comes to proper use of sunscreens.

"I think that, most commonly, patients apply too little. They don't put on a thick enough layer and their timing isn't good" when it comes to the best time to apply sunscreen, said Cheryl Citron, a Livingston dermatologist.

There are research studies around that prove her point. Scientists at Royal Liverpool University Hospital in Liverpool, England, for example, concluded that

even sunscreen users who are extremely sensitive to the sun failed to apply sunscreen to prominently exposed parts of their bodies, including the ears, temples and neck. Another study, this one in Vail, Colo., found that skiers who waited up to 2½ hours to reapply sunscreen were five times more likely to get a sunburn than those who waited two hours or less.

We often make the mistake of assuming we can stay out in the sun longer because we've put on sunscreen.

But because some UV rays reach the skin no matter how much sunscreen you put on, sunscreen users shouldn't extend their exposure to the sun because of a misconception that sunscreen can prevent all the adverse effects of too much sun exposure, according to the Skin Cancer Foundation.

"Sunscreens are a helpful tool, but they're not perfect," Spencer said. "We do not have the perfect sunscreen, one that you can put on once and be 100 percent protected all day."

For maximum protection, it takes about a

shot glass-full of sunscreen to adequately cover your entire body, said Spencer. "Don't be shy. Glump that stuff on." Although light-skinned people are at the greatest risk for sunburn, everybody should be glumping it on. African-Americans and other people of color also can be sunburned and develop skin cancer.

Apply sunscreen even on cloudy days because 80 percent of the sun's rays can penetrate cloud cover. The American Academy of Dermatology recommends applying sunscreen a half-hour before you head outdoors.

Spencer said sunscreen wears off within two hours. So you need to keep reapplying it, ideally, every 1½ to two hours or after perspiring; "swimming and towel drying. So called "waterproof" or "water-resistant" sunscreens still wear off and still need to be reapplied, according to Spencer.

Choose a sunscreen that's "broad spectrum." The designation means the sunscreen is designed to protect you from UVB and UVA rays (it will say so on the label). "UVB rays are principally responsible for burning," said Spencer. "UVA is more responsible for the development of wrinkles. Both of them lead to skin cancer."

You should use a sunscreen with an SPF (sun protection factor) of at least 15. Don't be fooled into thinking an SPF of 30 will give you twice the protection, warned Spencer. He explained an SPF 15 blocks 94 percent of UV rays while an SPF 30 blocks 97 percent.

Citron said, even though you don't get double the protection with an SPF 30, "you are increasing it. So, if you're really, really sensitive to the sun, if you've already had skin cancer, if your skin is very fair, then using a higher SPF is good idea." ■

Visit: [www.thedermgroup.com](http://www.thedermgroup.com)