

Protection From the Sun

Warm, sunny days are wonderful. The sun feels good on your skin. But what feels good can be very bad for you, your family, and especially your baby. Before you take your baby to the park, beach, or even out into the backyard, please read this. It will help you learn how to protect your entire family and develop safe sun habits that can last a lifetime.

Skin cancer and the sun

The sun provides energy to all living things on earth. But it can also harm us. Its ultraviolet (UV) rays can cause sunburn and skin cancer.

The sun is the main cause of skin cancer, the most common form of cancer in the United States. There will be a million new cases of skin cancer this year. Skin cancer can and does occur in children and young adults, but most of the people who get skin cancer are older. Older people get skin cancer because they have already received too much of the sun's damaging rays. Your skin remembers each sunburn and each suntan year after year.

All skin cancers are harmful and some, especially malignant melanoma, can be deadly if left untreated. Malignant melanoma is the second most common form of cancer in women 25 to 34 years of age. Sun exposure in early childhood and adolescence contributes to skin cancer.

The sun and your baby's skin

Your baby's skin is very delicate and it's up to you to protect it. Sunburns hurt. Sunburns can also cause dehydration and fever. Too many sunburns and too much sun exposure over the years can cause not only skin cancer, but also wrinkles and cataracts of the eye.

Most of our sun exposure—between 50% and 80%—happens before we turn 18 years of age. That's because children spend more time outdoors than most adults do, especially in the summer.

The dangers of sunburns

Research has shown that two or more blistering sunburns as a child or teen increase the risk of developing skin cancer later in life. It is very important, therefore, to protect babies and children from sunburn.

- A baby's sensitive skin is thinner than adult skin and a baby will sunburn more easily than an adult will. Even babies with naturally darker skin need protection.
- It's up to you to protect your baby. A baby can't tell you when he is too hot or beginning to sunburn. Your baby can't move out of the sun and into the shade without your help.

Protecting your baby

Follow these simple rules to protect your baby from sunburns now and from skin cancer later in life:

- Babies under 6 months of age should be kept out of direct sunlight. Move your baby to the shade or under a tree, umbrella, or the stroller canopy.
- Dress your baby in clothing that covers the body, such as comfortable lightweight long pants, long-sleeved shirts, and hats with brims that shade the face and cover the ears.
- Select clothes made of tightly woven fabrics. Clothes that have a tighter weave the way a fabric is constructed—generally protect better than clothes with a broader weave. If you're not sure about how tight a fabric's weave is, hold the clothing up to a lamp or window and see how much light shines through. The less light, the better. Clothing made of cotton is both cool and protective.
- When using a cap with a bill, make sure the bill is facing forward to shield the baby's face. Child-sized sunglasses with UV protection are also a good idea for protecting your child's eyes.

Remember...

- The sun's rays are the strongest between 10:00am and 4:00 PM. Try to keep your baby out of the sun during these hours.
- The sun's damaging UV rays can bounce back from sand, snow, or concrete; so be particularly careful in these areas.
- Most of the sun's rays can come through the clouds on an overcast day; so use sun protection.

Sunscreen for your baby

Choose a sunscreen made for children. For babies *under* 6 months of age, sunscreen may be used on small areas of the body such as the face and the backs of the hands if adequate clothing and shade are not available. For babies over 6 months of age test the sunscreen on your baby's back for a reaction before applying it all over. Apply carefully around the eyes, avoiding the eyelids. If your baby rubs sunscreen into her eyes, wipe the eyes and hands clean with a damp cloth. If the sunscreen irritates her eyes, try a different brand or try a sunscreen stick or sunblock with titanium dioxide or zinc oxide. If a rash develops, talk to us.

When choosing a sunscreen, look for the words "broad-spectrum" on the label it means that the sunscreen will screen out both ultraviolet B (UVB) and ultraviolet A (UVA) rays. A sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 15 should be adequate in most cases.

Use enough sunscreen and rub it in well, making sure to cover all exposed areas, especially your baby's face, nose, ears, feet, and hands and even the backs of the knees. Put it on 30 minutes before going outdoors. The sunscreen needs time to work on the skin. Reapply the sunscreen frequently, especially if your baby is playing in the water. Zinc oxide, a very effective sunblock, can be used as extra protection on the nose, cheeks, tops of the ears, and the shoulders.

Remember...

- Sunscreens should be used for sun protection and not as a reason to stay in the sun longer.

Sunburn can be dangerous

If your baby gets a sunburn and is under 1 year of age, contact us at once—a severe sunburn is an emergency. For babies over the age of 1 year, tell us if there is blistering, pain, or fever.

Remember...

- Avoid sunburns—they can be very dangerous to a baby.
- If your baby gets a sunburn, give juice or water to your baby to replace lost fluids.
- Cool water soaks may help your baby's skin feel better.
- *Do not use* any medicated lotions on your baby's skin unless we recommend it.
- Keep your baby completely out of the sun until the sunburn is totally healed.

Set a good example

Make sun protection a regular family event. Your baby needs you for protection from the sun and from sunburns. Since babies learn by imitation, you can be the best teacher by practicing sun protection yourself. Teach all members of your family how to protect their skin.

Sun myths

Myth: A suntan is good for your baby.

Fact: A tan is a sign of skin damage.

Myth: Babies can't get sunburned on a cloudy day.

Fact: Most of the sun's rays can come through clouds and cause sunburns.

Myth: Baby oil is good sun lotion.

Fact: Baby oil causes the skin to burn faster and offers no protection at all.

Myth: Your baby needs the vitamins that the sun provides.

Fact: A proper well-balanced diet and minimum sunlight will give your baby all the necessary vitamins.