

The Medical Minute: Safe fun in the sun with skin protection

July 4 2012, By Holly Gunn



Swimmers take advantage of a hot day to enjoy the swimming pool on the University Park campus of Penn State. Credit: Andy Colwell

With outdoor activities in full swing this summer, how are you protecting your skin? We know that spending time in the sun increases the risk of skin cancer, the most common cancer in the United States. It also causes early skin aging for all skin types and ethnicities. The times of sunbathing and sunburns should be over. However, with all the sunscreen products on the market and numerous news articles about the questionable safety of these products, it can be hard to know what to use and how.

The [FDA](#) just recently made new rules to help [consumers](#) select and use sunscreens appropriately. You will start seeing labels with a [skin](#) cancer and skin aging alert, such as “Spending time in the sun increases your

risk of skin cancer and early skin aging.” If the product does not have a broad spectrum coverage of both UVA and UVB rays and has low SPF from 2 to 14, it will have to alert you that “This product has been shown only to help prevent sunburn, not [skin cancer](#) or early skin aging.” Water resistance claims on the product's front label must tell you how much time a user can expect to get the declared SPF level of protection while swimming or sweating, based on standard testing. Consumers will be seeing only 40 minutes or 80 minutes of protection on these [labels](#).

Companies have until next December to make these changes, so let's review what you should be doing in the meantime.

To reduce your risk, you should regularly use sunscreens with broad spectrum SPF values of 15 or higher. If you are going to be in direct sunlight use SPF 30 or higher, and reapply that sunscreen at least every two hours, more if you are in the water or sweating.

We need to also limit our time in the sun, especially between the hours of 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., when the sun's rays are most intense. Wearing clothing to cover skin exposed to the sun can protect us even better than sunscreen, as we can cover every nook and cranny. For example, long-sleeved shirts, pants, sunglasses, and broad-brimmed hats are a good idea when feasible. You can even use umbrellas for full protection.

“But wait, I was also told to avoid products containing oxybenzone and retinyl palmitate.” If you're concerned about potentially toxic chemicals you may want to avoid these two common chemicals in sunscreens. Still, the research is not conclusive or very convincing yet. For children younger than 6 months, use sunscreens that have titanium oxide or zinc oxide in them. They are not absorbed by the skin and they are made with minerals, not chemicals. They are also less likely to sting their and your eyes.

Hopefully these tips will allow you to have safe fun in the [sun](#)!

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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