

Sunshine could benefit health and prolong life, study suggests

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Exposing skin to sunlight may help to reduce blood pressure, cut the risk of heart attack and stroke – and even prolong life, a study suggests.

Researchers have shown that when our skin is exposed to the sun's rays, a compound is released in our blood vessels that helps [lower blood pressure](#).

The findings suggest that exposure to sunlight improves health overall, because the benefits of reducing blood pressure far outweigh the risk of developing [skin cancer](#).

The study has been carried out by the University of Edinburgh.

Heart disease and stroke linked to [high blood pressure](#) are estimated to lead to around 80 times more deaths than those from skin cancer, in the UK.

Production of this pressure-reducing compound – called nitric oxide – is separate from the body's manufacture of [vitamin D](#), which rises after exposure to sunshine. Until now it had been thought to solely explain the sun's benefit to human health, the scientists add.

The landmark proof-of-principle study will be presented on Friday in Edinburgh at the world's largest gathering of skin experts.

Researchers studied the blood pressure of 24 volunteers who sat beneath

tanning lamps for two sessions of 20 minutes each. In one session, the volunteers were exposed to both the [UV rays](#) and the heat of the lamps. In the other, the UV rays were blocked so that only the heat of the lamps affected the skin.

The results showed that blood pressure dropped significantly for one hour following exposure to UV rays, but not after the heat-only sessions. Scientists say that this shows that it is the sun's UV rays that lead to health benefits. The volunteers' vitamin D levels remained unaffected in both sessions.

Dr Richard Weller, Senior Lecturer in Dermatology at the University of Edinburgh, said: "We suspect that the benefits to [heart health](#) of sunlight will outweigh the risk of skin cancer. The work we have done provides a mechanism that might account for this, and also explains why dietary vitamin D supplements alone will not be able to compensate for lack of sunlight.

"We now plan to look at the relative risks of heart disease and skin cancer in people who have received different amounts of sun exposure. If this confirms that sunlight reduces the death rate from all causes, we will need to reconsider our advice on sun exposure."

More information: The International Investigative Dermatology conference starts tomorrow (Wednesday) and runs until Saturday.

Provided by University of Edinburgh

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