

Physician offers tips on sun safety

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The long, lazy days of summer are finally here, and while it's the perfect time to have some fun in the sun, one University of Alabama professor stressed the importance of being smart while enjoying those golden rays.

The problems typically caused by the [sun](#) and [hot weather](#)—sunburn, heat exhaustion and heat stroke—are "very preventable," said Dr. Cathie Scarbrough, assistant professor in UA's College of Community Health Sciences, a family medicine physician and assistant residency director for the College's family medicine program. It just requires that people take precautions and educate themselves on the dangers of too much sun.

One of the most common problems people have during the summer is staying hydrated.

"It's not waiting until you're thirsty to drink water but to drink water beforehand," Scarbrough said.

She recommended drinking one or two full-size glasses of water before going outside and then hydrating every hour or more, depending on the activity level.

Those engaging in outside activity also need to give themselves time to acclimate to the heat, which can take about one to two weeks for the [average person](#), Scarbrough said. Until then, people should slowly increase their physical outside activity, if possible.

When planning outdoor activities, try to avoid the hottest part of the

day—11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Mornings and early evening tend to be slightly cooler and better. Also, wear loose-fitting, light-colored clothing when outside.

A key factor in staying safe over the summer is knowing not only the actual temperature, but what it feels like outside, or the heat index.

"Generally, the higher the heat index, the more likelihood you're going to have issues with the heat," Scarbrough said. "That's going to make the difference in how much water your body's losing when you're outdoors."

Too much sun could result in a sunburn, heat exhaustion or even heat stroke.

"With sunburns, the thing to remember is you don't actually start turning red until after three to five hours out in the sun," she said. "Without sunscreen, you can burn in 15 minutes, so if you know you're going to be out in the sun for any length of time, wear sunscreen. ... And don't forget to reapply. It can wash off, even the waterproof or sweat-proof kind."

The type of sunscreen is really person specific. Some people have more melanin (pigmentation) in their skin and may require less, while those who have less melanin and are fair-skinned are typically more prone to getting sunburned, Scarbrough said.

SPF 15 is recommended for daily use, and this can be found in quite a few cosmetics. In general, one should use a broad-spectrum sunscreen with SPF30 or higher while performing outdoor work, sports or recreational activities. Broad-spectrum products will filter out both UVA and UVB light.

Location is also a factor. People who live close to the equator or in high

altitudes get more sun exposure and are at greater risk for developing [sunburn](#). Certain medications, including over-the-counter medications like ibuprofen, can also make people more prone to sunburns. Some prescription medications, like diuretics, certain heart medications, or antibiotics, can also make you more sensitive to the sun.

With heat exhaustion, people will generally have a higher core temperature. They may be running a low-grade fever, sweat, have nausea, vomiting, dizziness, headache, blurry vision and/or extreme fatigue. If any of these symptoms exist, Scarbrough said people should get out of the sun and drink fluids.

Heat exhaustion will generally resolve within one to two hours. If someone is vomiting or cannot keep fluids down or has not returned to his normal baseline after two hours, he should see a physician, she said.

If someone has a "mental status change" where he feels confused or he passes out or blacks out, then he could have heat stroke and should go to an emergency room. Scarbrough said heat stroke can lead to other complications, including seizures and prolonged coma.

Recovery time for each of these varies, but people should hold off on additional sun exposure until they have fully recovered.

"A lot of times, for [heat exhaustion](#) or mild [heat stroke](#), people will go to the hospital, get some IV fluids and go home," Scarbrough said. "For others, it takes longer. It depends on how bad your kidneys, muscles and brain were impacted by the [heat](#). And it's unfortunate, because it's very preventable."

Provided by University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa

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