

# **Be sunscreen-savvy and lessen a main skin cancer risk factor**

May 13 2015, by Nicole Wyatt

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# Your Sunscreen Questions Answered

Exposure to natural and artificial ultraviolet (UV) light is a risk factor for all types of skin cancer.



**3 million+** cases of skin cancer each year could be prevented by avoiding excess UV light exposure

## Which sunscreen is right for you?

According to UAB dermatology experts, you should choose a sunscreen that is:



**"broad spectrum"**  
— meaning it protects against the two types of harmful UV rays: UVA and UVB



**SPF 30**  
or above



**Water resistant**  
(if you are participating in sports or are going in the water)



**Oil-free**  
(if your skin is acne-prone)

## What about kids?

Follow the advice above for children and infants older than 6 months. BUT, sunscreens that contain physical blockers, like zinc oxide or titanium dioxide, are preferred in this age group, because they may cause less irritation to the sensitive skin of young children.



## How much should you use?

A good rule of thumb, UAB experts say, is to apply three times more than what you think you need to apply. You need to put on so much that you really have to work to rub it in.



Spray? Lotion? Does it matter? It's simple, say UAB dermatologists:

**Choose the one you'll use.**



**Gels**



**Sprays**



**Lotions**



**Stick forms**

(good for kids because they don't run in the eyes)

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Selecting the correct sunscreen from a sea of choices may seem daunting, but dermatology experts at the University of Alabama at Birmingham say there are key components the right choice will contain.

It is estimated one in five Americans will develop [skin cancer](#), according to the American Academy of Dermatology. Avoiding ultraviolet light—a risk factor for all types of [skin](#) cancer—could prevent more than 3 million skin cancer cases annually.

"Everyone should wear [sunscreen](#) all year round, even on cold, cloudy days," said Marian Northington, M.D., director of UAB Cosmetic Dermatology. "Unless use of a flashlight is necessary to see, you should have sunscreen on."

Selected sunscreen should, according to Northington:

- Be "broad-spectrum"—meaning it provides UVA and UVB protection
- Be at least an SPF 30
- Be water-resistant if participating in sports or in the water
- Be oil-free if skin is acne-prone

Northington suggests not relying on makeup with sunscreen in it.

"With sunscreen, the higher the number, the better. Most people don't use as much as needed in order to achieve that SPF. So it's actually good to have the highest SPF possible," Northington said.

Northington says picking the type of formulation is completely up to the user.

"As long as it is at least SPF 30 and broad-spectrum, whether it is a spray, stick, lotion or gel, it is fine," Northington said. "Get the formulation you like, because if you don't like it, you are less likely to use it."

When it comes to choosing between pricier sunscreens and generic, Northington again notes, as long as it is at least SPF 30 with UVA and UVB coverage, either is OK.

"Between the different brands, some have more elegant formulations than others," Northington said. "Some are zinc-oxide-based, which will be more lightweight and smooth. Some creams can be heavier or thicker and not rub in as well, so they can differ."

If the sunscreen will be used for the whole family, there are some considerations to make, says Amy Theos, M.D., director of Pediatric Dermatology at Children's of Alabama and associate professor in the UAB School of Medicine.

"While regular sunscreens are safe to use on children, they may be more likely to cause irritation," Theos said. "Sunscreens that contain physical blockers, like zinc-oxide or titanium dioxide, are preferred for infants and toddlers because they may cause less irritation to the sensitive skin of young children."

For infants older than six months and children, Theos says a broad-spectrum, water-resistant sunscreen with an SPF of at least 30 should be chosen. This should be reapplied approximately every two hours.

As for application, children and adults should apply three times more

than what feels needed, Northington says. "You need to put on so much that you really have to work to rub it in, to be properly protected."

Provided by University of Alabama at Birmingham

Citation: Be sunscreen-savvy and lessen a main skin cancer risk factor (2015, May 13) retrieved 4 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-05-sunscreen-savvy-lessen-main-skin-cancer.html>

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