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How to Save Your Skin in the Season of Sun

By: Jane E. Brody

Catherine M. Poole, author with Dr. DuPont Guerry IV of "Melanoma" (Yale University Press, \$16.95) and herself a melanoma survivor, urges parents to set a good example by adopting sensible sun behavior and making sun protection as automatic as fastening a seat belt.

Skip to next paragraph More Columns: Personal Health "A person who has a history of severe sunburns as a child or teenager is at an especially high risk for the development of melanoma," Ms. Poole wrote. "Even just one or two bad sunburns can increase the risk of melanoma in later life."

Everyone in the family should be using sunscreen with an S.P.F. of at least 15 on exposed skin all year long. Babies should always be kept out of the sun, and toddlers, older children and adults should be well protected with hats and clothing or sunscreen.

Most people who use sunscreen don't use enough. It should take an ounce of lotion to cover an adult in a bathing suit. Sunscreen should be applied about 20 to 30 minutes before going out and reapplied on dry skin after swimming ("waterproof" screens are helpful, but not enough once you're out of the water).

Look for sunscreens that protect against both UV-A and UV-B rays. All sunscreens contain substances that block the UV-B rays that cause sunburn (the S.P.F. rating refers only to these agents). The most effective protection against skin-damaging, cancer-causing UV-A rays comes from zinc oxide, Parsol 1789 (avobenzone) and Eusolex 8020, Dr. Kaufman reported. Some UV-A protection is afforded by titanium oxide, oxybenzone and dioxybenzone.

Some experts have theorized that sunscreens can actually promote melanomas and skin damage by increasing the time people can spend in the sun before they burn, but no studies have yet shown this. It should not happen if people are careful to use sunscreens that block UV-A as well as UV-B rays.

Melanomas can also develop on the scalp and in the eyes, so don't forget a hat and sunglasses, and on the lips, which should be protected by sunblocking lip balm or lipstick. Be sure to protect your skin on cloudy days, too, since clouds do not filter out UV-A radiation.

People at the greatest risk of developing melanoma, those with fair complexions who burn and freckle readily, are also at high risk of developing superficial skin cancers. People with a large number of moles and those with melanoma in close relatives are also at increased risk.

Last year in "The Melanoma Letter" published by the Skin Cancer Foundation, Dr. Marie-France Demierre of Boston University School of Medicine described the growing evidence for statins as a protector against melanoma.

These cholesterol-lowering agents interfere with the action of two oncogenes, mutations in Ras and Rho proteins, that play a role in the development of melanomas. Laboratory studies also suggest that statins may promote programmed cell death and thus may be useful as therapy for melanoma patients.

But the wise person who ventures outdoors would not rely on such chemoprotection at this point. Sensible behavior in the sun provides the best protection, and only you can apply it.

For more information, a helpful book is "Sun Protection for Life" (New Harbinger) by Mary Mills Barrow and John F. Barrow.