

Despite better labeling, sunscreens still often misused

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Summertime means being outside, and as good as it might feel to soak up the sun, doctors warn that we all need to take more seriously our use of sunscreen to avoid premature aging or, worse, skin cancer.

"The biggest problem is that people want to look tanned," said **Dr. Rebecca Baxt of Baxt CosMedical in Paramus**. "People equate a tan with being healthy and that being pale is bad. But what they should be thinking about is the consequences such as thick, spotty and wrinkly skin, not to mention the health hazards."

It's getting a little easier to do that.

In 2012, new rules from the Food and Drug Administration took effect governing label information regarding sunscreen. Included in the new rules are defining the term "broad spectrum," which means a sunscreen offers protection from both ultraviolet A (UVA) and ultraviolet B (UVB) in proportional amounts. Before, sunscreens did not address UVA radiation, which causes skin cancer and early aging but not necessarily the telltale signs of sunburn.

Additionally, claims such as "waterproof," "sweatproof" or "sunblock" are no longer allowed.

Dr. Naana Boakye, dermatologist at Bergen Dermatology in Englewood Cliffs, said despite greater awareness of the damage the sun can cause and the use of products with higher sun protection factors (SPF), melanoma rates are still increasing. Melanoma is the most deadly form of skin cancer. However, she concedes that the skin cancers seen today were most probably the results of sun exposure years ago.

"We're screening for it more so we're seeing it more now," she said. "It's not always from right now. It's from a very long time ago."

Dr. Komal Pandya, dermatologist at The Derm Group in Paramus, reported that most of her older patients are those who used baby oil to get a tan, while her younger patients are those who use tanning booths. Neither, of course, is a good idea.

Dermatologists noted that many people don't know how to use sunscreen. The biggest problem? They don't use enough.

Boakye explained that on average people should use about one ounce – the equivalent of a shot glass full – of SPF 30 to SPF 50 to cover all the exposed skin on their body. Depending on body size, this amount may fluctuate. Since most beach-goers probably aren't carrying around a measuring cup in that bag of theirs, another way to figure out how much to use is to fill up the palm of your hand. Most people, however are applying only half to a quarter of the amount, Boakye said.

Many people also are applying their sunscreen just before they worship the sun. You should "apply it at least 30 minutes before going out into the sun," Boakye said. The reason? Baxt explained that the skin protector needs time to dry.

Many people also fail to wear sunscreen on cloudy days. "Those are the days when you can get the worst burn," Baxt said. "You need to put on sunscreen no matter what the weather, hazy days included. Even if it's raining, bring the sunscreen along."

And of course sun-worshippers should avoid the sun during the hottest time of the day, which is usually between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., wearing a hat and long sleeves to cover your skin.

And never, ever go to a tanning booth, experts say. The belief that getting a 'base color' at a tanning salon can help protect against future burns from the sun is a myth. There is no such thing as a protective tan, dermatologists say; any tan is a sign that there is damage to the skin. So a 'base tan' won't help but actually add to the damage done to your skin.

"I think it's ridiculous to get a base tan," Boakye said. "It's just damage on damage."

So what kind of sunscreen should you buy? For over-the-counter sunscreens, dermatologists recommend a broad spectrum with an SPF of at least 30. Additionally,

they say the mineral-based sunscreens, those with zinc oxide and/or titanium dioxide, offer the best coverage.

And although spray sunscreens are popular, some experts frown on these because it's difficult to tell if the sunscreen was properly applied. Boakye, Baxt and Pandya urge sun-worshippers to make sure the spray is "actually applied to the skin" and not just the air.

"I see so many people applying spray sunscreens as if they were perfumes," Baxt said. "I say put it on like icing on a cake, and rub it in!"

And, one more thing: "If you have a bottle left from last year, check the date," Baxt said. "If it's expired or if you don't see the expiration date, chuck it."

Debbie Carlson of the Chicago Tribune contributed to this report.

- See more at: <http://www.northjersey.com/news/health-news/despite-better-labeling-sunscreens-often-misused-1.1050299#sthash.9ZR8sna5.dpuf>