



Pass the sunscreen

Keeping kids sun safe this summer



Childhood sun exposure is even more important than adult sun exposure in contributing to the development of skin cancer later in life. This fact sheet provides information and tips on how to protect your child's skin (and your own!) this summer.

Who should wear sunscreen?

Babies under six months old should not wear sunscreen or be exposed to direct sun because their skin is very delicate and sensitive. The best thing to do is keep babies under six months old in the shade, protected from the sun. Sunburns in babies can be medical emergencies — if your baby gets a sunburn, contact your paediatrician.

Beyond six months, applying sunscreen and wearing protective clothing (long sleeves and pants) is recommended for infants, toddlers, and children — as well as teenagers and adults — if they're going to be outside in the sun.

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How does it work?

Sunscreens work by absorbing, reflecting, or scattering UV radiation (UVA and UVB) from the sun. SPF represents the length of time that sunscreen-protected skin can be exposed to UVB rays before developing redness and burns compared to unprotected skin. Skin does have different levels of its own SPF from melanin. For example, lighter skin can have an SPF of only three while darker skin can have an SPF of almost 13. It is important to note that darker skin colour does not make you immune to skin cancer. Using sunscreen and wearing protective clothing are important sun safety measures for all kids.

How should we choose?

When picking a sunscreen, the higher the SPF, the better the protection. Though the SPF numbers may double, it's important to note that it doesn't mean the protection doubles. For example, SPF 15 offers 93% protection against the sun, while SPF 30 offers 96.7% and SPF 60 offers 97.7%. In general, SPF 30 is a good all-purpose sunscreen for an active day outside. In Canada, sunscreens containing Helioplex™ or Mexoryl XL™ provide excellent UVA and UVB protection, so consumers should try to look for one of these names on the bottle.

How much should be applied?

Most people don't apply enough sunscreen to protect themselves. Adults need a full ounce (30 mL) to properly cover their skin. The amount needed for kids will vary depending on the size of the child, but don't worry about applying too much sunscreen — children should have a generous amount of sunscreen applied 20 minutes before going into the sun, and it should be reapplied every two hours when outdoors for an extended time. If possible, try to apply sunscreen to dry skin for best absorption.

Sun Safety and Skin Cancer Facts

Skin cancer is expected to kill 1,000 Canadians each year. Melanoma and non-melanoma skin cancers account for more diagnoses than lung, breast, and prostate cancer combined.

Exposure to UltraViolet (UV) radiation is the biggest risk factor for the development of skin cancer. We now know that UVA (the rays that cause aging) also cause cancer, not just UVB (the rays that cause sunburns). Some people worry about not getting enough vitamin D if they wear sunscreen or avoid the sun, but dermatologists say that Ontarians should gain vitamin D through food (like salmon, eggs, milk, or orange juice) or taking supplements — not from exposure to UV rays.