

Ask Dr. Mikell

By Dr. Oswald Mikell

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American Board of Dermatology | American Board of Cosmetic Surgery | Physician of the Year 2008

Summer has arrived, and with it comes our glorious sunshine – and those sunburns! Excessive sun exposure, especially sunburn is now known to be a major risk factor in the development of skin cancer. It also increases the appearance of aging. And, you don't have to be a sun worshiper to be overexposed to the sun's damaging rays. Those of us living here in the Lowcountry, and other warm climates, are particularly at risk. So what can you do to protect your skin? One answer is sunscreen!

Q. What Type of Sunscreen Should I Use?

A. It depends on how much sun exposure you're anticipating. In all cases you should use a broad-spectrum sunscreen offering protection against both UVA and UVB rays.

Q. What is SPF and how do I know what number I need?

A. SPF is an abbreviation for Sun-Protection Factor. The SPF numbers, such as 15, 30, or 50 indicate how long a topical sunscreen remains effective on the skin. To figure out how long you can stay in the sun with a given SPF, use this equation:

$$\text{Minutes to burn without sunscreen} \times \text{SPF number} = \text{maximum sun exposure time}$$

For example, if you burn after 10 minutes of sun exposure, an SPF of 15 will allow you to be in the sun for up to 150 minutes without burning.

Q. Is there a right and wrong way to apply sunscreen?

A. Absolutely. Proper application is arguably the biggest problem with sunscreen. Simply put, if sunscreen is not used properly, it doesn't work well. To ensure that you get the full SPF of a sunscreen, you need to apply 1 oz – about a shot glass full. The other most common problem with usage is re-application. Sunscreen can easily be rubbed off, wiped off, dissolved in water or with perspiration. You must re-apply sunscreen throughout the day to maintain protection.

Q. What can I do to be sure that I'm maximizing sunscreen usage?

A. Always apply sunscreen 20 minutes before you go outside. This allows time for it to penetrate or bind to the skin. Use the recommended amount of sunscreen. Re-apply sunscreen every 2 hours until sunset - even if the label promises "all-day" protection. It should be re-applied after swimming or sweating, or if it has been rubbed off. And, always check the label for an expiration date. Sunscreen ingredients lose their effectiveness over time - expired sunscreen must be replaced.

Q. Is it true that you should apply sun screen to your hands in the summer months

A. Yes. Unless you always wear gloves, your hands receive a tremendous amount of sun exposure over time. Wrinkles, brown spots and leathery skin are caused by the sun's ultraviolet (UV) radiation.

Q. What if sun damage has already been done? I grew up here at the beach and even though I now use sunscreen I have rough textured skin and fine lines around my eyes.

A. While prevention is always the best course of action there are several things that can be done to help reverse some of the sun's damage. Call Dermatology Associates of the Lowcountry and schedule a consult appointment. We'll explain the options and recommend which treatment is best suited for you. (843) 689-5259