

Macho Man And Skin Cancer

One weekend of sunshine and Bob the builder gets his shirt off. All over the country there are scaffolders, bricklayers, roofers, road workers who are probably nursing pink backs and shoulders. And this is one factor that accounts for a dramatic increase in the number of men developing skin cancer. In six years the number of men diagnosed with malignant melanoma, the most lethal form of skin cancer has gone up by 12 percent, whereas the increase in women is just over 2 percent. The total now runs at around 6,000 cases a year for the most easily preventable form of cancer. Men think it's macho to get their shirts off and definitely not macho to ask their work mates to spread factor 20 on the bits they can't reach.

Sunshine – Be Safe But Not Scared

It's impossible to believe that there is anyone unaware of the links between excessive sun exposure and skin cancer. Tanned can never be healthy as the tanning process is the result of skin damage and this is equally true of artificial tans from sunbeds.

It's not just repeated exposure that puts you at risk, even one episode of severe sunburn increases your chances of skin cancer. As if this weren't enough to worry about, too much sun is the single most important cause of skin ageing. Photo ageing, to give it its proper name, damages the structure of the skin causing premature wrinkles, loss of elasticity and the overall appearance of crepe paper.

Sunburn is caused by ultraviolet rays - UVA and UVB - and you're at greatest risk when the sun is at its highest. Your susceptibility to sunburn depends on your colouring and the amount of pigment in the skin - those with red hair and freckles always burn and never tan, blue eyed blondes always burn but may tan lightly, and everyone else can burn with too much exposure. Even those with black skins who have lived away from strong sunshine for years are at some risk.

The idea that getting a suntan makes you look good is comparatively recent. Up to the middle of the 20th century it was certainly not fashionable as only outdoor manual workers were ever exposed to the sun and it was definitely not posh to be brown. Women would go to great lengths to keep the sun off their skin and in the height of summer parasols, large hats and long gloves were the fashion. When travel became cheaper and more accessible, everything changed and getting a suntan was a sign that you could afford foreign holidays, even more so during the winter. And that's when the problems really started.

According to Professor Gordon McVie of the Cancer Research Campaign, "Malignant melanoma (cancer of the skin) is a silent killer and one of the few cancers to have an impact on the young. The sun is a direct cause of this cancer and deaths from it have gradually doubled, killing around 1,500 people a year."

As you head off for your sunshine holiday don't be fooled into taking chances with sunshine and your health. The damaging rays from the sun are UVA, which ages the skin and UVB which burns. In spite of recent publicity to the contrary, Factor 15 products do not give sufficient protection and a minimum SPF of 20 or above is essential for all but the darkest of skins. Because skin has a rough textured surface the layer of sunscreen is thinner over raised areas. Tests using Factor 15 preparations were done in laboratories with the lotion spread on glass plates, which has no relevance to human skin.

Never sunbathe between 11 and 3, use high factor sunscreen and spend a maximum of 10 minutes a day sunbathing. Increase a little after 3 days, but never get burnt. Keep babies

out of direct sun, and toddlers and children should be covered in sun block and forced to wear a hat. **One severe sunburn in childhood can cause skin cancer years later** so take extra special care with the children. It does help that we now see cricketers on our TV screens with total sunblock on their faces and you can encourage youngsters with face painting competitions using the coloured sunblock sticks that are now available.

Just sitting under the beach umbrella is not enough protection as the sun's rays are reflected off water and sand, bounce back under the umbrella and burn your skin. So, even in the shade, use the sunscreen and reapply it regularly. Time spent out on the water can be very damaging and if you're sailing, windsurfing, waterskiing or fishing you really have to be even more careful. As well as high factor sunscreens this is when you must use total sunblock on the nose, cheekbones, lips, ears and even the top of your head if your hair is thinning or you're bald.

In Australia skin cancer reached alarming proportions some years ago and the government introduced their highly successful Slip, Slop, Slap campaign. Lifeguards on the beaches were even given the authority to spray swimmers with sunscreen or send them off the beach. Hats, loose fitting, tightly woven clothing, and regular reapplication of lotions or creams, particularly after swimming, are essential.

For safe sun - SLIP on a shirt, SLOP on the sunscreen and SLAP on a hat.

But never forget that putting on the sunscreen doesn't mean you can spend all day in the blazing sun cooking like a chicken on a spit. All that these products do is give you a bit longer in the sunshine with less risk.

Developing a rash on the second day of your holiday is quite common and it's most likely to be polymorphic light eruption (PLE), an allergic reaction to ultra violet rays. It's often blamed on an allergy to sun screen lotions, you stop using your factor 20 and the rash gets worse. The answer is to use more protection and keep the affected area – often the front of the chest or upper arms – covered. If you do have sensitive skin try Delph Factor 30, an hypoallergenic sunscreen - one of the few without the irritant chemical lauryl sulphate.

Naturopaths like me have long believed that good nutrition can help to protect skin from ultraviolet radiation by increasing the protective antioxidants in your diet. These neutralise the ageing and cancer-causing free radicals produced by sun damaged cells. **Eat lots of the orange, red and yellow** fruits and vegetables, and **all dark green leafy vegetables** for their betacarotene and vitamin C. Eat a wide variety of nuts and seeds for the highly protective and antioxidant vitamin E. Nuts, pumpkin seeds and shellfish are a good source of zinc and selenium, also part of the antioxidant story.

B vitamins are the other essential nutrients for good skin, so get all you need of those from wholegrain cereals, liver, pulses, yeast extracts and poultry. Olive oil and avocados are terrific sources of vitamin E which is one of the great skin protectors. All these nutrients should be part of your healthy daily diet anyway.

I met Dr. Sheldon Pinnell, Professor of Dermatology at Duke University, USA, a world expert in the field of sun and skin cancer. "We now know that sunscreen protection alone is inadequate protection," says the Professor. "All plants and animals use antioxidants to protect themselves from ultraviolet light, especially vitamins C and E which plants make but humans have to eat. For ten years our laboratory has researched topical applications which allow these nutrients to be absorbed by skin, providing more lasting protection than preparations which sit on top of it. Sunscreens come off in water, on clothes and with sweat, and people never use enough to start with. The combination of sunscreens, topical antioxidants, shade and appropriate clothes, is vital for protection against sun-ageing, wrinkles and skin cancer."

But there is another side to the coin as there are very real and essential benefits that come from sunshine, as well as the risks. As always when it comes to questions of health, the best answer is common sense and a balanced approach. When ultraviolet light from the sun reaches your skin it triggers the process by which the human body manufactures its own supply of vitamin D. A deficiency of this essential nutrient can cause or aggravate rickets, osteoporosis, diabetes, breast cancer, bowel cancer, multiple sclerosis, rotten teeth and depression. You can get vitamin D in your diet from oily fish like herrings, mackerel, salmon and sardines, but food is not a total replacement for sunshine.

A Department of Health study of nearly three thousand children revealed the terrifying fact that 16 percent of boys between 15 and 18 had such low levels of vitamin D that they were at real risk of rickets – a disease which causes crippling deformity of bones, late walking in babies, knock knees, bow legs, and physical deformity. Vitamin D is essential for the formation of bones and lack of it increases the risk of osteoporosis. Researchers all over the world have found that lack of sunshine is a factor in winter depression, diabetes, heart disease, tooth decay and even multiple sclerosis. In dismal Britain you have 100 times more chance of getting MS than if you lived on the equator.

Covering yourself in sunblock, wearing sun-protective make-up and a large floppy hat every time you go out for 10 minutes is madness. Frequent short exposures to sunlight, an hour under a shady tree in the garden or a spring afternoon sitting in the park while the kids kick a football or play on the swings is something we all need. And that's very different from two hours baking on a Mediterranean beach in the middle of the day.

In the hysteria of skin cancer panic, we mustn't lose sight of the fact that the sun's rays are the source of all life, a bringer of joy and happiness and provider of the vital vitamin D. They can even reduce PMS and boost men's testosterone. . . .

. . . Just ask Shirley Valentine.

For more information on antioxidant lotions see www.skinceuticals.com