



sunscreen 101

Many patients coming for skin cancer screenings at Portland Dermatology Clinic understand the importance of protecting one's skin from the damaging rays of ultraviolet light that come from the sun. Most accept as part of that protection the importance of sunscreens. With the vast number of sunscreens available, however, it can sometimes be difficult to know which products to choose and how to use sunscreens properly.

The physicians at Portland Dermatology Clinic (PDC) recommend regular use of broad spectrum sunscreens for sun exposed skin to prevent skin cancer and excessive aging of the skin. A sunscreen should be SPF 30 – higher numbers do not protect more as long as it is applied adequately – and broad spectrum (meaning able to protect against both UVA and UVB). The SPF only refers to how well a sunscreen protects against UVB. To ensure UVA protection as well, one must read the active ingredients on the label and make sure that the sunscreen contains at least ONE of the following: avobenzone, Mexoryl, zinc oxide or titanium dioxide. Do not buy it if it doesn't contain one. For those who have concerns about chemical sunscreens, stick with ones that contain only zinc or titanium.

Most people use too little sunscreen and apply too infrequently. Approximately one ounce (a shot glass full or a large adult handful) is recommended for an average sized adult to cover the entire body. This means that a typical 3-6 ounce bottle of sunscreen should last for only 3-6 applications. The great irony of many sunscreens is that sunlight can inactivate them, making them useless after a few hours in the sun. For this reason, you should apply ample amounts of sunscreen every 2 hours even if you are not sweating or swimming. Finally, even the best sunscreen is far from perfect so combining it with protective hats and other clothing and trying to avoid the peak UV hours between 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. is wise.

Much has been written of late about the purported health benefits of vitamin D. The story is far from clear and is still a very active area of research. Certainly those of us living in the relatively sun-poor Northwest, and especially those of us who practice careful sun protection, are at risk for being vitamin D deficient. We recommend that you discuss with your doctor having vitamin D levels drawn and supplement with vitamin D3 rich foods and supplements along with adequate calcium. There is currently no consensus on optimal daily dosing, and there is some controversy about excess vitamin D increasing calcium levels and leading to kidney stones. The upper limit of safe daily dosing of vitamin D3 (cholecalciferol) has historically been 2000IU/day but is possibly much higher.

The doctors at PDC try to keep abreast of the health and safety implications of sunscreens. It can be a challenge to sort through the information widely available on the internet and in newspapers and discover what is validated by reputable research. Our current recommendations are to apply sunscreen generously prior to sun exposure and reapply every 2 hours. Avoid mid-day sun exposure and cover up with clothing when possible. Consider oral vitamin D supplements if strict sun protection practices are being used consistently. Ask your dermatologist if you have additional questions.