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Protecting your skin from the sun

Dermatology Services

Information for Patients

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Why do I need to protect my skin?

There are 2 types of ultra violet (UV) light in the sun's rays that can damage the skin: UVA and UVB. Both have been linked with causing skin cancer.

Too much exposure to the sun can cause sunburn, premature aging of the skin causing 'age spots' and wrinkles.

How can I protect my skin?

You need to protect yourself from too much exposure to the sun, even in the UK. It is best to protect yourself from the sun between April and September in the UK. Always protect yourself when abroad in sunny climates.

Remember that the sun's rays can go through water, glass, clouds and flimsy clothing. The suns rays are also reflected off water and snow.

You should follow this advice, in order of importance:

- Do not sunbathe.
- Avoid exposure to the sun between 11am and 3pm.
- Wear clothing to cover your skin.
- Wear a hat.
- Apply sunscreen to all exposed areas, especially the face, forearms, backs of the hands and the V of the neck. Take special care of the ears and the nose and, in men, the bald scalp.
- Never use sunbeds.
- Wear good quality sunglasses / CE mark or UV 400 label and British Mark Standard.

Why should I avoid exposure to the sun between 11am and 3pm?

At this time of day the sun is at its hottest, and you are more likely to burn.

What type of clothes give the best protection?

Closely woven dark-coloured cotton clothing, for example, long sleeved tops and trousers gives the best protection. To check the weave, hold the garment up to the light. You should not be able to see through it. Loose fitting clothes give more protection than those worn close to the body.

Some garments have an Ultraviolet Protection Factor (UPF) number, which tells you how much ultra-violet (UV) radiation passes through the clothing. For example, UPF 20 lets 1/20th of the UV radiation to pass through.

Stretching fabrics decreases sun protection. Also, old, threadbare or faded garments may give less protection.

What type of hat is best?

You should wear a hat with at least a 3-inch brim to protect your head, face, neck and ears. It should be made of cotton rather than straw. A cotton cricket hat is ideal. Avoid baseball caps as they offer no protection to the ears and neck.

What are sunscreens?

Sunscreens are creams and lotions that can protect against both UVA and UVB. Not all products offer UVA protection.

How do I know which sunscreen to use?

There are 2 ‘ratings’ systems on packs of sunscreen, the star rating and the SPF number.

What does the star rating mean?

The star rating system tells you how much protection the sunscreen gives against UVA. The number of stars ranges from 1 to 5, and the higher the number of stars the better the protection. You should use a sunscreen with a rating of at least 4 stars.

What is the SPF number?

An SPF (Sun Protection Factor) number is a measure of the level of protection a product offers against UVB, when used appropriately. The SPF can be found on the front of all sun care protection products in the form of a number.

Use suncream with a high sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 30 whenever you are exposed to the sun. Follow the instructions on the bottle and re-apply as recommended, even after swimming. Remember to apply suncream behind ears.

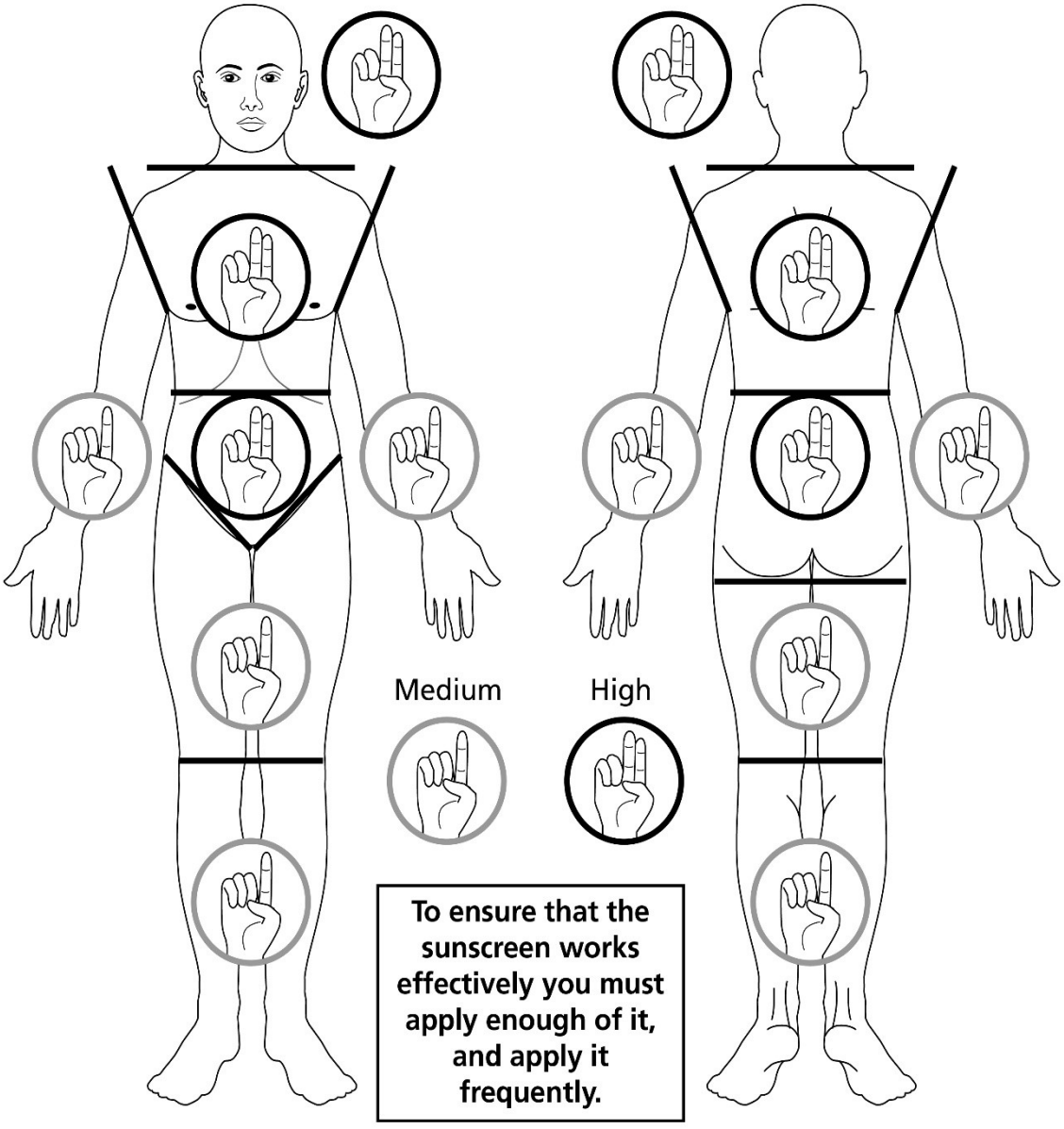
Are there different types of sunscreen?

Yes. If you wish to swim or take part in other water activities you can use a water-resistant or water-proof sunscreen. Water-resistant sunscreen keeps its SPF during 40 minutes of water activity. The waterproof sunscreen will keep you protected during 1 hour and 20 minutes of water activity. Waterproof sunscreens are considered to be sweat-proof as well.

How should I apply sunscreen and how much should I use?

You should apply 1 or 2 fingerstrips of sunscreen for each area of the body, as shown. A fingerstrip of sunscreen is an amount that covers the whole of your finger, from the palm to the tip.

Sunscreen should be applied 30 minutes before you go in the sun and should be reapplied every 2 hours to all exposed areas. Always reapply sunscreen after swimming or when perspiring heavily.



Is it OK to use last year's sunscreen?

No. Sunscreen in opened containers will offer less protection. You should always throw away any unused sunscreen after it has been open for 6 months.

Do I only need to use sunscreen in the summer?

In the UK, you do not need to use sunscreen in the winter. However, winter sun can also cause damage to your skin if you are visiting a sunny but cold country. For example on a skiing holiday, particularly at high altitudes.

Why should I not use sunbeds?

Sunbeds are not a safe alternative to tanning outdoors. Like the sun, sunbeds give out harmful UV rays which damage the DNA in our skin cells and can cause skin cancer.

Why do I need to wear sunglasses?

UVA can cause cataracts. It is important to wear good quality sunglasses.

When choosing look for 1 of the following:

- CE Mark and British Standard.
- UV 400 label.
- 100% UV protection written on the label or sticker.

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