

Sun Protection is for Everyone

A suntan may look and feel good, but sunlight is the primary cause of skin cancer. The tingly warm sensation associated with sun exposure is actually radiation damage caused by ultraviolet rays. Outdoor workers are particularly vulnerable to sun damage, and because the damaging effects of excessive sun exposure are not always obvious, the dangers of skin cancer are sometimes overlooked.

What's at Stake?

Long-term skin damage

Ultraviolet rays from the sun can penetrate and change the structure of skin cells. Superficially, sun exposure causes peeling skin, premature wrinkles, and age spots.

Eye damage

Chronic exposure to sunlight can cause cataracts and macular degeneration, a leading cause of blindness.

Sunburn

Excessive sun exposure can cause sunburn. Unlike a thermal burn, sunburns are not immediately apparent. They usually appear several hours after sun exposure, and can worsen before they improve. Symptoms include skin tenderness, redness, blistering, flakiness and peeling, headache, fever, and nausea.

Melanoma

Sun exposure also greatly increases the risk for skin cancer. Pay attention to your moles. If you have a mole that appears asymmetrical, or has changed color, shape, size, or texture, consult a doctor immediately. These are all signs of developing skin cancer.

Who is at Risk?

Anyone, regardless of age, occupation, and skin color, is at risk for damage from sun exposure.

Here are some common misconceptions:

“Only fair skinned people need to worry about sun damage.”

False. Having tanned or naturally dark skin does not eliminate your need for sun protection.

“My skin won’t get burned or damaged when it’s cloudy or during winter.”

False. It may feel cooler, but clouds do not block the sun’s harmful UV rays. In fact, certain reflective surfaces—such as sand, concrete, or steel—can reflect UV rays and increase the risk of sunburn.

“I work in the sun, but I’ve now got tanned skin, so I’m not really at risk.”

False. A suntan is just your body’s way of protecting itself from UV exposure. If your skin cells do not get a chance to heal properly, your cells could become cancerous.

What Can Go Wrong?

A truck driver drives the same route for much of his 28-year-long career. His truck windows do not filter out UV rays. As a result, one side of his face—the side closest to the window—is exposed to the sun more than the other side. UV rays severely damage the skin cells on one side of his face, causing him to develop unilateral dermatophylosis. Now, one side of his face looks 20 years older than the other side.

How to Protect Yourself:

- Wear a sunscreen with an SPF of 15 or higher when working outside. Make sure that it is broad-spectrum and water-resistant. Reapply every two hours.
- Make sure you have access to shade during lunch and rest breaks.
- The sun is at its greatest intensity from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. If possible, talk to your supervisor about possibly reorganizing your work hours so that work can be done before or after these hours.
- Protect your skin from UV rays by wearing long-sleeved shirts and wide-brimmed hat. If performing a job which requires a lot of bending, wear a hat with a neck flap to protect the back of your neck from the sun.
- Some substances can reduce the effectiveness of sunscreen, including industrial substances like asphalt and diphenyls. Take extra precautions when working around these substances.
- Wear sunglasses when possible to protect your eyes.
- Take sun protection seriously! It is never too late to begin protecting your skin. Even if a sunburn is not immediately apparent, your skin may still receive damage on a cellular level.

Final Word

It is better to prevent a sunburn than to treat one. Sun damage can also cause invisible damage to your skin cells, increasing your risk for skin cancer. Be safe, and slop on the sunscreen!