



# THREE WAYS TO PROTECT YOUR KIDS FROM SKIN CANCER

If your child has ever blistered from a sunburn, his or her likelihood of developing skin cancer is double that of someone who never burned. In fact, childhood and teen years are when people get half of their lifetime exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation. While skin cancer is often curable, it is also deadly. Deaths from one kind of skin cancer—melanomas—have steadily increased in the past 35 years. Since UV rays cause most melanomas, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) encourages prevention of excessive UV exposure for children and adolescents. Their message to parents is clear—skin cancer risk can be lowered by reducing UV exposure for kids.

## Kinds of skin cancer

Skin cancer – the abnormal growth of cells in the skin – is the most common type of cancer. Two of the three types of skin cancer are almost always curable if found early and treated:

- **Basal cell carcinoma** – the most common nonmelanoma cancer; doesn't usually spread to other parts of the body.
- **Squamous cell carcinoma** – less common and occurs in injured or diseased skin; can spread to other parts of the body.
- **Melanoma** – the least common but most deadly form of skin cancer, where skin cells become abnormal, grow rapidly, and affect surrounding tissues; if caught and treated early, may be curable in early stages.

## Step #1: Avoid direct sun during peak hours

Experts say the number-one thing you can do for your child's future health is to provide protection from UV rays between peak hours of 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. But, what about outdoor play—camp, sports, swimming pools, and tennis courts? Physical activity—much of which takes place outside—is very important for your child's overall health. Still, parents need to take protective measures.

One simple answer is to schedule outdoor activities before or after peak hours—like a soccer game at 5 p.m. instead of noon. Or go to the pool after an early dinner instead of at lunchtime. And teach your child to seek out the shade whenever possible during peak hours.

What about suntans and tanning beds? Years of tanning without getting sunburn can still cause skin cancer as well as cataracts. So experts encourage parents not to promote or buy into the idea that a suntan is a sign of good health. And, they say, keep your teen away from sunlamps and tanning beds. The UV exposure in a tanning bed is like being outdoors in the noon sun—and it might even be worse.

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### Step #2: Wear sunscreen

Your child should avoid getting a sunburn by wearing sunscreen. Even a few severe, blistering sunburns in childhood increase the risk of skin cancer. So, if your child can't stay out of the sun at peak times, sunscreen becomes his or her best protection. Apply sunscreen to your child consistently and correctly:

- Let the sunscreen dry before going into the sun.
- Reapply sunscreen after leaving the water, sweating, or drying off with a towel.
- The sunscreen should have an SPF—sun protection factor—of 15 or higher.

If your child is under six months old, talk to your doctor about using a sunscreen, since there is a concern about chemicals being absorbed into a baby's delicate skin. Experts warn not to use sunscreen with a false sense of security. A high SPF number may give protection for just a few hours, so reapply often.

### Step #3: Wear protective clothing and sunglasses

Here are additional protective steps experts recommend:

- Wear sun-protective clothes – Wide-brimmed hats, baseball caps, or caps with ear and neck flaps provide the best protection for your child's face. Have your child wear long pants and a long-sleeve shirt if in the sun during peak hours. Tighter weave fabrics, natural cotton or Lycra™ rather than bleached cotton and darker colors all transmit less UV radiation.
- Wear sunglasses – Sunglasses, especially those that block 99 percent of UV-A and UV-B radiation, can reduce damage to the eye. It doesn't matter how dark the lenses are or what color they are, since it's the chemical coating applied to the surface of the lens that provides the protection.

### Skin color

The lighter your child's skin color, the higher his or her risk of getting skin cancer. For a child with red or blond hair, or fair skin that freckles or burns easily, the risk is higher. However, dark skin does not give your child automatic permission for excessive UV exposure – since anyone can get skin cancer. So prevention techniques are still vitally important regardless of skin color.

### Family history

A child who has a parent or sibling with skin cancer has a higher risk for eventually developing it than those with no family history. However, most skin cancers occur in people with no family history of it.

### Age and gender

As teens become young adults, the damage from long-term exposure to UV rays begins to show in an increased risk of melanoma in their twenties. Melanoma is the third most common cancer in young adults ages 20 to 24, and the most common cancer in ages 25 to 29. About half of all melanomas occur before age 50. Men are statistically more likely to get skin cancer than women.

## Environmental factors

Higher amounts of UV radiation come at higher altitudes or latitudes close to the equator, and because of ozone depletion or light cloud coverage. Other influencing factors include sun reflective materials – like pavement, water, sand, and snow, or being outdoors during the height of the sun from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., especially during spring and summer.

## Find out more

If you'd like to find out more about skin cancer and sunburns, visit the Cancer Condition Center under the Health & Wellness tab on *MyHumana*, your secure Website on **Humana.com**.

## Bottom line:

No sunburns allowed. Skin cancer prevention should be a family affair – where adults and children alike take preventive measures. Experts say that if you use sunscreen, so will your children. Teaching your child to take healthy steps to prevent skin cancer can have one additional benefit: he or she is learning that healthy behaviors in general can have positive effects on health and wellness – a lesson that will make adopting healthy behaviors more likely in other areas.

## Sources:

- American Cancer Society's "Parent's Guide to Skin Protection"
- American Cancer Society's "Sun Basics for Kids"
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention