

The Truth About Sun Exposure and Kids

**By
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You've read it before, but read it again! The risk of sun exposure begins early in life, and children need extra protection from the sun. Eighty percent of our lifetime sun exposure occurs before age 18, because children tend to spend so much time outdoors. Every sunburn adds to the risk of developing melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, research suggests that two or more blistering sunburns as a child or teen increases the risk of developing skin cancer later in life.

So do the following this summer:

- Keep kids out of the midday sun (10 a.m. to 4 p.m.), when the rays are strongest.
- Use a sunscreen labeled “broad spectrum,” which protects against both UVA and UVB rays. Both types of rays from the sun are known as “ultraviolet,” and both can cause skin damage.
- Select a waterproof sunscreen with an SPF (sun protection factor) of at least 30. (Be aware that SPF refers *only* to protection against UVB rays.)
- Apply sunscreen 30 minutes before going outside, and reapply every two hours or after your child has been in the water.
- Kids should wear broad brim hats -- make sure that baseball cap is not on backwards.

- Clothing with a tight weave that is loose on the body protects best. A good test is to hold the clothing up to the light to check if you can see through the fabric – You’re looking for clothing that doesn’t let any light through.
- To protect your child’s eyes, use sunglasses that give both UVA and UVB protection.
- Remember that sun reflects off surfaces like water, sand, snow, and concrete, which means more risk of sunburn when you are near those surfaces.
- Also, don’t reserve sunscreen for sunny summer days. Even on a cloudy day, 80 percent of the sun’s rays pass through the clouds.

The most complete protection comes from broad spectrum sunscreens that contain zinc oxide, titanium dioxide, or avobenzone. These block UVA and UVB rays, and any of these types of sunscreens are good for children. The advantage of buying a sunscreen marketed specifically for kids is that it’s likely to be waterproof and might have a more pleasing smell.

What about babies? Can you use sunscreen?

A common sense approach is to keep babies under six months out of direct sun as much as possible. We don’t yet know the full risks and benefits of using sunscreen on babies this young. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), babies can sunburn more easily because their skin is thinner and is more likely to be sensitive. This is true even for babies with naturally darker skin. Therefore, dress infants in hats and protective clothing when outdoors. If exposure to direct sun is unavoidable for a baby younger than six months, the AAP suggests that you decide whether or not to apply

sunscreen in conjunction with your pediatrician. If a baby under 12 months ever gets a sunburn, the pediatrician should be contacted immediately because this could become a medical emergency. A sunburned infant could have serious skin blistering or pain that needs professional attention, could suffer from heat exhaustion, and should be checked for related symptoms like dehydration. If your young infant becomes sunburned and you can't immediately reach your pediatrician, it's wise to go to the emergency room of your local hospital.

Is waterproof really waterproof?

A sunscreen labeled "waterproof" is intended to stay on the skin for 80 minutes in the water. One labeled "water resistant" is intended to last about 40 minutes. Regardless, you must reapply sunscreen after your child comes out of the water, every time. Also, remember that towel-drying can also remove sunscreen.

Can I use last year's sunscreen?

Expiration dates do matter and experts don't recommend using last year's lotions. The products lose their effectiveness over time when the chemicals of which they are made begin to break down or separate. If the sunscreen develops a gritty feel or changes color or consistency, you should throw it out. Always check the expiration date on a bottle of sunscreen. The FDA (Food and Drug Administration) says you should store sunscreen in a dim, cool place, because high temperatures can affect the product.

Are there tricks for applying sunscreen?

Apply sunscreen to dry skin 30 minutes before leaving the house. Don't forget to apply to the face, hands, ears, and even the scalp, but steer clear of the eyelids and immediately around the eyes to avoid irritation. For babies and toddlers who suck their thumb or put their hands in their mouths frequently, limit the amount of sunscreen you put on that area. One tip is to apply the sunscreen to the backs of the hands, but not the palms or between the fingers. Regardless of your child's age, apply sunscreen before clothing or the bathing suit goes on, so you don't miss any spots. One ounce of sunscreen should cover all parts of the body.

Can I use bug repellent at the same time?

The CDC (Centers for Disease Control) says you can apply both sunscreen and bug repellent without any problem, and both products will work. They do warn parents away from new products that combine both sunscreen and bug repellent in one lotion, because the re-application times are so different. For example, sunscreen needs to be reapplied more often than bug repellent, and the makers of bug repellents warn that they can be dangerous to kids if over-applied. **CDC recommends putting on sunscreen first.** Wait 30 minutes for the skin to absorb it before applying bug repellent.

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