



Red Alert - Use Sunscreen!

Your best friend always goes with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 15, while your brother swears by his SPF 50 sport blend but you see packages with numbers as high as 85 or 100-plus line the shelves. With so much SPF confusion, what's a skin-cancer-fearing sunscreen buyer to do?

To get what SPF is all about, it helps to know some other solar lingo. The sun shines down with two types of harmful rays. Ultraviolet A (UVA) rays pierce into your skin's deeper levels, suppress your immune system, and cause wrinkles and other signs of aging. Ultraviolet B (UVB) rays, on the other hand, cause sunburns. Both contribute to skin cancer risk.

SPF measures sunscreen's ability to block UVB rays. It's calculated by measuring how long skin covered in sunscreen takes to burn. However, the formula is not straightforward—for instance, SPF 15 blocks 93 percent of UVB rays and SPF 30 blocks 97 percent.

Since no product is 100-percent effective, super-high numbers offer little extra benefit; however, most experts suggest selecting at least a 15. What's more, the SPF rating can't tell you how well the product bars UVA rays.

Seek Broad Protection

Experts recommend seeking products marked "broad-spectrum" and The American Academy of Dermatology suggests selecting a water-resistant formula. Some brands come in sticks or sprays, while others offer skin-soothing extras like vitamin E.. If you soak up the sun's rays without protecting your skin, you could be setting yourself up for skin damage. And, the odds of getting skin cancer go up when you get too much sun.

To help keep your fun in the sun safe, consider these sunscreen tips:

- Use 1 ounce of SPF 15 or higher – enough to fill a shot glass
- Apply between 20 minutes and two hours before going outside
- Apply every two hours, or every 80 minutes if you're swimming or sweating
- You still need sunscreen on cloudy days or when you're indoors and exposed to the sun. UVA rays can penetrate glass windows
- Protect your lips by using lip balm with sunscreen
- Don't use sunscreen on babies younger than six months. Use hats, clothing and shade to guard infants against the sun
- Consider makeup that contains sunscreen
- Choose broad spectrum products that guard against the sun's UVA and UVB rays

Source: American Cancer Society