

Daily Union Article
5/18/2019
Title: Sunshine Savvy

As days get longer and the sun shines brighter, many are thinking about ways to get outside and enjoy it all. After all, what is Kansas without a bunch of sunshine in the spring and summer?

Our bodies need sunshine. Sunlight supports our sleeping patterns by keeping us awake by day and allowing us to sleep well at night. During the winter months, our bodies might experience a deficiency in sunshine which can lead some people to experience seasonal affective disorder – a form of depression. Vitamin D, often called the “sunshine vitamin”, is naturally produced by our bodies when we get the right amount of sunshine. Because Vitamin D is naturally present in very few foods, sunshine is an important catalyst needed by our bodies to produce the amount of Vitamin D to keep us healthy. When the ultraviolet rays from sunlight absorb into our skin, they trigger vitamin D synthesis.

Vitamin D is important for the absorption of calcium in our body. It is needed for both bone growth and strong bones. It prevents rickets (a bone disease due to Vitamin D deficiency) in children. Vitamin D also helps protect our aging body from osteoporosis.

However, before you set your sites on the benefits of sunshine and head outside, it is important that you keep safety and prevention in mind. After all, too much sunshine can be a health concern, as well.

When you absorb too many ultra violet rays from the sun, it can damage your skin and cause lifelong effects. Ongoing exposure to sun that results in sunburn ages the skin faster and reduces the amount of elasticity that is characteristic of healthy skin. In younger years, your skin has a greater capacity to heal itself. When you experience a sunburn, the skin reddens, may blister, will dry out, then slough off. Within a couple of weeks, your skin returns to good health because it was able to repair itself. As you age, the skin is less capable of repairing itself – often becoming more wrinkled with set lines.

Over time, excessive exposure to sunshine can cause skin cancer – the most common type of cancer in the United States. According to the National Institute of Health (NIH), more than 2 million people are treated for 2 types of skin cancer: basal cell and squamous cell carcinoma. These cancers are seen in both older and younger people, and they're rarely life-threatening.

NIH reports melanoma is a less common but more serious type of skin cancer that's diagnosed in more than 68,000 Americans each year. Another 48,000 are diagnosed with an early form of the disease that involves only the top layer of skin. Melanomas arise from the cells that provide pigment (color) to the skin. Sunburns, especially during childhood, may also raise your risk for melanoma.

So how can you protect yourself and your children or grandchildren from excessive exposure to sunlight and reduce the risk of sunburns?

- 1) Avoid prolonged time in the sun, and choose to be in the shade rather than in direct sunlight.
- 2) Wear protective clothing and sunglasses. Light colored long sleeved shirts can help deflect the sunrays from the surface of your skin. A wide-brimmed hat can protect your face and neck from sunrays, as well as keep your ears shaded. Long pants can protect your legs from over exposure, as well.
- 3) Use sunscreen between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. Sunscreen is especially important at that time, when the sun's rays are most intense.

It is not uncommon for our Kansas summers to get extremely hot. The thought of wearing a long-sleeved shirt and long pants when the temperature and humidity is high turns most Kansans away from wearing protective clothing.

Don't overlook the other recommendations provided!

Unless being outside is a necessity, stay inside during the heat of the day and while the UV rays are at the most dangerous levels. If that isn't an option, then find shade whenever possible.

If you know you are going to be exposed to sun rays for an extended amount of time, make sure you use sunscreen rated with an appropriate level of protection. The higher the protection rating, the safer your skin is when placed in direct sunlight.

The SPF, or sun protection factor, is printed on the labels of sunscreen containers. They can range from SPF 15 to SPF 50 or greater. But what do these numbers really mean? A sunscreen labeled SPF 30 means it will take you 30 times as long to get a sunburn as it would if you had no sunscreen on at all. A sunscreen labeled SPF 50 means it would take you 50 times as long to burn.

The effectiveness of sunscreen is dependent on several factors: a) active ingredients in the sunscreen (check the expiration date to make sure the ingredients are still effective); 2) the amount you use; 3) how often you use it (and reapply it); 4) perspiration; and 5) time spent in water (swimming, skiing, etc.) Read the directions on the container to make sure you know how much you should use and how often you should reapply the sunscreen.

It's never too soon to start using sunscreen. Help your children and grandchildren understand the importance of using sunscreen to help reduce their risk of skin cancer when they get older. Make sure you are using sunscreen, as well. This shows children how serious you are about sun protection.

Enjoy time outside with family and friends, but don't forget to protect yourself from the sun so that you can have healthy skin throughout your life. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!