

West Haven Department of Public Health



Health Links



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Sunscreen U.

With the maze of sun protection choices, selecting the one that works best for you can be a frustrating task. The good news is that you do not need a degree in sun protection to find the right product for you and your family. In order to purchase the appropriate sunscreen, it is important to first determine what your protection needs are as well as understand the basics.

Sunscreen helps to prevent the sun's ultraviolet (UV) radiation from reaching the skin. Two types of UV radiation, UVA and UVB damage the skin and increase the risk of skin cancer. UVB is the real culprit behind sunburn, while UVA rays penetrate the skin more deeply and are associated with wrinkling and leathering. They also worsen the carcinogenic or *cancer causing* effects of UVB rays, and increasingly are seen as a cause of skin cancer on their own. Sunscreens vary in their ability to protect against UVA and UVB.

SPF or Sun Protection Factor is a measure of a sunscreen's ability to prevent UVB from damaging the skin. The Skin Cancer Foundation uses the following example. If it takes 20 minutes for your unprotected skin to start turning red, using an SPF 15 sunscreen should prevent reddening 15 times longer, approximately five hours. Perhaps look at it in terms of percentages. SPF 15 blocks about 93 percent of all incoming UVB rays. SPF 30 blocks 97 percent; and SPF 50 blocks 98 percent. These may seem like insignificant differences, but if you are sensitive to light, or have a history of skin cancer, those percentages will make a difference. It is *very important to remember*, that **no sunscreen can block all UV rays**.

There isn't a sunscreen that will remain effective longer than two hours without reapplication. Some feel that the strength of a sunscreen alone is enough to protect their skin for a trip to the beach. Reapplication is crucial to receive the best protection. Second, "reddening" of the skin is a reaction to UVB rays alone and tells you little about what UVA damage you may be getting.

The type of sunscreen you use really all depends on your sun exposure. If you work outside or spend a lot of time outdoors, you need stronger, water-resistant sunscreen. The "water resistant" types are also good for hot days or while playing sports, because they're less likely to drip into your eyes. However, these sunscreens may not be as good for everyday wear. They are messy and need to be reapplied every two hours.

During a day at the beach, one person should use around one half to one quarter of an 8 oz. bottle of sunscreen. It should be applied 30 minutes before sun exposure to allow the ingredients to bind to the skin. Reapplication is just as important as putting it on in the first place, so the same amount should be reapplied every two hours as well as immediately after swimming, towel drying, or excessive sweating.

Staying out of the sun is recommended as the best sun protection. If you have to be out in the sun be sure to use a high-quality product with an SPF of 15 or higher. Check its ingredients to make sure it offers broad-spectrum protection. These would include titanium dioxide, zinc oxide and/or Paba.

Public Health Web Resources

West Haven Dept. of Public Health: www.whhd.org, CT State Dept. of Public Health: www.dph.state.ct.us
CDC: www.cdc.gov The Skin Cancer Foundation: www.skincancer.org

West Haven Department of Public Health 355 Main Street, West Haven, CT 06516. Phone: (203) 937-3660.

To join our list, please contact the editor, Maureen B. Lillis, MPH, CHES at mlillis@westhaven-ct.gov, or the Director of Health, Eric Triffin, MPH at ETriffin@westhaven-ct.gov or by fax at (203) 937-3676.