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Shining a light on earth-friendly sunscreen

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Getting sunburned in Seattle sounds like a joke, but many of us have learned from painful experience how easily it happens.

We might actually be in more danger of sunburn than those who live in sunnier climates because when the sun finally does arrive, we're so desperate for it. Fortunately, new information and products can help us protect our skin when we soak up the sun.

Q: How do I choose safe, effective sunscreen?

A: Since sun can cause cancer and other skin damage, select a broad-spectrum sunscreen that protects from both UVA (ultraviolet A or long-wave) rays and UVB (ultraviolet B or short-wave) rays. Your sunscreen should also have an SPF (sun protection factor) rating of 15 or higher.

The safety of sunscreen ingredients is confusing and controversial. The nonprofit Environmental Working Group (EWG) lists the ingredients of more than 1,300 sunscreen products (www.ewg.org/2010sunscreen) and rates them for safety. EWG's top-rated sunscreens contain zinc or titanium.

However, many of those mineral-based sunscreens contain nanoparticles, extremely tiny particles less than 100 nanometers in size. Friends of the Earth, another nonprofit, recommends against using sunscreens with nanoparticles because of potential skin damage but offers few sunscreen alternatives.

Q: What are other potential problem ingredients?

A: EWG advises steering clear of sunscreens containing oxybenzone, vitamin A ("retinyl palmitate") or insect repellent, due to health concerns about those ingredients. Because sprays or powders may have tiny particles unsafe to breathe, stick to lotion sunscreens. EWG also recommends against using sunscreens with SPF ratings above 50, saying those may give false expectations of protection from skin damage.

The Personal Care Products Council (www.personalcarecouncil.org), a national trade group representing manufacturers, has attacked EWG's research as "baseless."

So far the federal government has stayed on the sidelines. Although the U.S. Food and Drug Administration began writing regulations for sunscreens in 1978, they have never been finalized.

Q: Any tips on using sunscreen?

A: Most of us typically apply less sunscreen than we need. About 1 ounce of sunscreen, enough to fill a shot glass, is usually required to properly cover exposed areas of the body, says the American Academy of Dermatology. Reapply every two hours or after swimming or perspiring heavily.

Keep in mind that the sun's rays are greatly magnified when reflected by sand or water, and more than 70 percent of the sun's rays can penetrate clouds. When you head up to the mountains, remember that ultraviolet (UV) radiation levels increase more than 10 percent for every 1,000 feet of altitude (Snoqualmie Pass sits at 3,022 feet).

Q: Is there another option besides sunscreen?

A: You can avoid the confusion about sunscreen, and that gunky feeling on your skin, if you're willing to cover up with clothing instead. But some clothes, including many whites and pastels, allow a significant amount of UV radiation to penetrate.

Consider sun-protective clothing that uses the Ultraviolet Protection Factor (UPF) rating system, which indicates how effectively a fabric will shield skin. The fiber, weave, color and weight of clothing can all contribute to its sun protection qualities, and UV-absorbing chemicals may also be added. Sun-protective clothing especially makes sense for fair-skinned people, children, and those spending lots of time at high altitudes.

Clothes with a UPF rating of 30 or higher offer "very good protection," according to the Skin Cancer Foundation. Many outdoor clothing retailers, including locally based REI, now carry a large selection of sun-protective clothing.

Q: But don't I need some sun to get enough vitamin D?

A: This has been extensively debated, but many skin-care experts say that because of cancer risks from sun exposure, we should take vitamin D supplements and limit unprotected sun to brief periods in the morning or evening.

After such a cool and cloudy June, the sun will get a warm reception in Seattle anytime it appears this summer. Enjoy it with protection, and you won't get burned.

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