

Live Healthy and Be Well!

Summer and Sun – but go easy on the sun!

--Stephen Jarrard, MD, FACS

A couple of spring times ago, Cappy Taylor and I were having a discussion about the sun and its effects on health and wellness. We had this same discussion again recently as we noticed the weather finally getting more “summer like.” She pointed out that, although a “healthy bronze glow” is considered very attractive in our culture, it might be nice to have some straight talk about how much sun you need, what is safe, value and use of sunscreen products, what are the dangers involved, and the like. It seems there is a lot of conflicting advice and misinformation out there, and so I told her I would try to get some facts out before the sun worshipping begins!

We were all taught in elementary school that we need the sun to help us make Vitamin D for our bodies. The action of the sun on the skin helps to convert pre-vitamin D into vitamin D that is needed for proper health, especially of the bones. However, due to the fact that we now are able to get Vitamin D from so many other sources, it is no longer necessary to use the sun for this purpose. It is now thought that 5 to 15 minutes of casual sun exposure two or three times a week is all that is needed. And, while it is obviously much better to be outside doing some physical activity and enjoying the great natural beauty of our area, a proper, balanced diet will give you almost all the D you need without the risks of dangerous UV!

Natural sunlight contains the entire electromagnetic spectrum, only a small portion of which is visible light. Fortunately for us, most of the harmful radiation is absorbed or reflected by our atmosphere. Of the ultraviolet “tanning rays” that do reach the surface of the earth, about 95% are UV-A, and only 5% UV-B. I remember from medical school that “UV-B means UV-Bad!” While UV-A is not as harmful to your skin, and only causes indirect sun damage, UV-B causes direct damage to your DNA and collagen in the skin – which can, coupled with other factors like cigarette smoking, cause premature appearance of wrinkles, thermal and other damage to the skin, and contribute to a higher risk of skin cancers. Just realize that *tanned* skin is *damaged* skin. The desirable glow that our society values so much is actually an indication that your skin has been damaged and is trying to repair itself and guard against further damage. The damage, if repeated, can become more and more difficult to repair, and thus permanent, at some point (wrinkles, patches, skin cancer).

The lights in a tanning bed approximate the sun’s light, but are not exactly the same. The quality of tan you will get (how “brown” you will become), is determined by how closely the lamp’s output mimics the spectrum of natural sunlight. Some are better, and thus closer to natural, than others. These lights also produce UV-A and UV-B light. You should try to use a lamp that has not more than 5% UV-B (UV-Bad) – which approximates sunlight. If the lamps you use or lay under have more than that, you need to be more careful with the exposure. You should also realize that the artificial “sunlight” in a tanning bed will put out much more UV in a day than the sun. While you may tan faster or get a quicker base, it will not last as long, and the tan you do get will not protect you from the real sun as well as a natural sunlight tan.

So, the bottom line is to be careful with the sun or with tanning lamps, and know the risks involved as well as the benefits. As with most things, moderation is the key! While your skin itself is a barrier and helps to protect against sun damage, it needs some help. Wear sunscreen if you have sensitive skin or expect a long exposure. The SPF factor refers to how many times more than your natural skin the material can protect. So...SPF 15 is that many times more protective than your natural skin barrier. I would say that an SPF of 15 is probably a minimum level of protection if you are going to be out very long at all. If you are light skinned, burn easily, or expect to be out a long time in the blazing sun or at a sandy beach area...you may need an SPF of 30 to 50. Re-apply often, especially after getting wet, and ladies, put it on under your makeup for best effect. If you do manage to get sunburned, there are some good short videos from the American Academy of Dermatology that gives good advice at their website www.aad.org

We really do enjoy hearing from you with any questions, concerns, or ideas for future columns and/or health and wellness related issues for the *Georgia Mountain Laurel*. Please send an email to rabundoctor@gmail.com, or call Jamie at 706-782-0480, and we will be sure to consider your input. If you use Twitter, then follow us for health tips and wellness advice @rabundoctor. Until next month, live healthy and be well!