

The ABCs of SPF

As we head into the summer months, kids will head outdoors for some fun in the sun. But during summertime the sun's rays are at their strongest, and parents must be even more vigilant about protecting their kids' delicate skin.

The risk for skin damage and skin cancer is directly related to the sun exposure a person experiences throughout his or her lifetime, and the risks add up over time.

Every year, more than 2 million people are diagnosed with a form of skin cancer in the United States, but it is something that is readily preventable with some simple precautions.

It's a topic that's near and dear to OSF HealthCare Pediatrician Dr. Shad Beaty's heart. Dr. Beaty's wife recently spent a year undergoing chemotherapy treatments for a malignant melanoma. He says skin cancers like this can often be attributed to childhood sunburns.

"Sunscreen use is essential," said Dr. Beaty. "All the studies show that all the damage to our skin occurs at the younger ages, so the damage that goes on that leads to skin cancer occurs before age 18. It's something that may not present until we're 35 or 40 or even later, but it's the damage we did when we were young that really caused the root problem."

However, all sunscreens are not created equal. With brands boasting a variety of benefits from broad spectrum to water and sweat resistance, finding the best one for your family can be tricky.

Facing a wall of options at the store can be overwhelming, but Dr. Beaty says always start with the basics.

"The key is looking for that SPF factor, number one," he said. "All the recommendations say 15 SPF or above, most dermatologists will recommend 30 SPF and above. There is no such thing as waterproof, so people need to understand that – all sunscreen does wash off over time. We recommend that you reapply at least every two hours when you are sweating or in the water."

Another issue up for debate – spray sunscreens vs. lotions. Dr. Beaty says either is fine, but while sprays are quick and convenient, it can be tough to get full coverage.

"There's a lot of information out there, a lot of research about the spray sunscreens. They are fairly effective, the key is getting good coverage. And so for most of my families who use the spray sunscreens, I recommend that you spray it on and that you still use your hands to spread that across the skin to make sure you have adequate coverage," said Dr. Beaty.

Sunscreen Sprays are also easy to inhale - which can irritate the lungs.

If you do choose to use spray sunscreen, it's important to have your child hold his or her breath while it is being sprayed, and to spray it in your hands and apply it to their faces manually.

There are some things to remember when choosing and using sunscreen.

- **Choose Broad Spectrum** – Broad spectrum will protect against both UVA and UVB rays, reducing the risk of sunburn, skin cancer and skin damage.
- **Choose at least SPF 30** – While higher numbers are available, research has not proven that SPF higher than 50 provides any greater protection.

- **Reapply Often** – Reapply sunscreen every two hours if you are not getting wet. Reapply immediately after swimming, sweating, or drying off with a towel. Water resistant does not mean waterproof.
- **Don't Use Last Year's SPF** – Heat can break down active ingredients in sunscreen, making it less effective. Sunscreen is good through the expiration date on the bottle only if it's kept in a cool place. It is recommended to throw sunscreen away at the end of the summer season and buy new next year.

Moderate sun exposure is good for most people. It helps promote vitamin D synthesis in the body and has been proven to treat seasonal affective disorder and relieve stress. But according to Dr. Beaty, taking simple steps to beat the burn could save your life down the road.

“All the oncologists and dermatologists will tell you – the tan is not really dangerous. We're not looking for that deep tan, because that really leads to a lot of problems down the road, just as far as thickening of the skin and aging of the skin, but it's truly those sunburns that cause the damage, so that's what we are trying to prevent.”

If you have any questions about what is best for your child, contact his or her pediatrician.