

Fun in the Sun: Remembering more than just the sunscreen

Put on sunscreen. Wear a hat. Stand in the shade.

These are probably a few things you've heard once, or a thousand times, over the years by a parent, teacher or coach.

However, roughly 5.4 million basal and squamous cell skin cancers are diagnosed each year, affecting more than three million people (some individuals have more than one skin cancer). Skin cancers are by far the most common type of cancer in the United States. The American Cancer Society says this is probably due to better skin cancer detection, people getting more exposure to the sun, and people living longer.

But what are we forgetting? Tim Smile, MD, is a radiation oncologist with OSF HealthCare. He breaks down key tips for people to remember before heading outside.

Use broad-spectrum sunscreen

"When you're choosing a sunscreen, it's important to pick one that has good UV-A and UV-B protection, so a broad-spectrum one," Dr. Smile says. "If you have any questions about that, talk to your primary doctor or a dermatologist."

Don't forget the tops of your ears, the back of your neck or between the top of your chest and neck

"A lot of people wear a nice baseball hat that covers their faces really well, but the tops of your ears, neck, and even the front of the top of your sternum area can get exposure to the sun without you realizing it," Dr. Smile says. "Keep an eye on those areas and make sure you're applying sunscreen there."

A cloudy sky doesn't mean the UV rays aren't there

"If it's overcast, you can still get UV exposure on your skin. So, that's something to keep in mind," he adds.

Dr. Smile says the sun is the strongest from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and recommends using the shade, wearing a broad-brimmed hat and applying sunscreen as good first steps. But don't forget to reapply, as sunscreen doesn't last all day. The general recommendation is to reapply every two hours during the day.

Head and neck are high-risk areas

"In my practice in radiation oncology, we deal with high-risk skin cancers. The vast majority of skin cancers are treated with topical treatments or minimally invasive surgeries," Dr. Smile says. "Rarely, skin cancers can present with locally advanced tumors requiring radiation therapy. My practice consists mostly of patients with locally advanced head and neck skin cancers because it's an area that is not usually covered from sun exposure by your clothing."

"A lot of times, skin cancers that happen in the head and neck are not only cosmetically challenging to deal with surgically but have a higher risk of deep invasion, spreading along nerves, or spreading to lymph nodes. A lot of challenging cancers can present in the head and neck area, which is why it's so important to minimize your sun exposure."

Don't forget your lips!

"A lot of people don't apply sunscreen to their lips, the lips can get sunburnt and can get skin cancers due to UV exposure there," Dr. Smile adds. "You can find lip balms that have SPF in them."

Dr. Smile says you should speak with your primary care provider and/or dermatologist once a year to keep things in check.