



SUN

AND THE APRIL HOLIDAYS

By Dr. Vernon Ching

Autumn is a deceptive season. Once the summer rains abate, the weather starts to cool and one is tempted to stay outdoors for long stretches to enjoy the fresh air before the cold winter temperatures start to bite. Particularly here in Africa, protection from the sun is necessary all year round, for a number of reasons.

THE SUN AND PREMATURE AGING

Frequent exposure to sunlight accelerates skin aging. Ironically, we are pursuing the 'Fountain of Youth' more than ever, yet still doing exactly what makes the skin age the fastest – exposing it to the sun.

A sun-kissed radiance has come to symbolise 'the good life', a life of leisure, youth and healthy living depicted by spending hours in the sun – on the beach, at the pool, on the tennis court or just working in your garden.

Yet outdoor living is 'frying' the life out of our skins. Sun exposure

causes up to 80% of the changes we characterise as "aging" in our skins: freckles, thinning or thickening of the skin, blotchy pigmentation, enlarged or broken blood vessels, loss of firmness, wrinkles, crow's feet, rough texture and "sun" spots.

People with fair skins who have a history of sun exposure develop more signs of photo aging than those with darker skins where photo aging signs are usually limited to fine wrinkles and a mottled complexion.

Photo aging occurs over a period of years. With repeated exposure to the sun, the skin loses the ability to repair itself and the damage increases. Sun-weakened skin loses its elasticity and becomes loose, wrinkled and leathery much earlier due to unprotected exposure to sunlight.

While it may seem that the signs of photo aging appear overnight, they actually lie invisible beneath the surface of the skin for years. UV photography enables us to see the damage accumulating beneath the surface of

the skin years before the signs of photo aging appear

Most of us get half our lifetime's exposure to sun before we've reached the age of 18. The reason we don't notice it, is that much of the damage to our skin will only appear years later.

DOES A SAFE SUNTAN EXIST?

Many health organisations have stated that even if we think a suntan looks healthy, it's not, and that the sun exposure needed to get a tan increases your chances of getting skin cancer.

Research has shown that a suntan is the body's best effort to protect itself from the known cancerous effects of ultraviolet (UV) light, the invisible portion of the light spectrum that penetrates the skin and changes DNA.

A suntan occurs when UV light strikes cells in the skin called melanocytes. These cells produce the brownish-black pigment called melanin, which darkens the skin. Although a tan doesn't cause cancer, it's a sign of the skin's



response to the harmful stress of UV radiation that almost certainly does.

WHAT SPF SUNBLOCK SHOULD I USE?

Sunblock protects your skin by absorbing and/or reflecting UVA and UVB radiation. All sun blocks have a Sun Protection Factor (SPF) rating. This rating indicates how long a sunscreen remains effective on the skin. A person can work out how long their sunblock will be effective by multiplying the SPF factor by how long it takes for him or her to suffer a burn without sunblock.

For instance, if you normally sunburn in 10 minutes without wearing a sunscreen, a sunscreen with an SPF of 15 will protect you for 150 minutes (10 minutes multiplied by the SPF of 15). Although sunscreen use helps minimise sun damage, no sunscreen completely blocks all wavelengths of UV light.

The American Association of Dermatology (AAD) recommends that a “broad spectrum” sunblock with an SPF of at least 15 be applied daily to all sun exposed areas then reapplied every two hours. However, in some recent clinical trials, sun blocks with SPF 50+ provided much better protection than sun blocks with an SPF of 15.

Active ingredients of sun blocks vary from brand to brand and can be separated into chemical versus physical agents.

The majority of chemical agents work in the UVB region and only a few chemicals block the UVA region.

New studies have shown that in addition to UVB and UVA, Infrared Radiation (IR-A) and the High Energy part of visible light (HEV) can also cause skin damage.

There are products on the market that do offer the most complete coverage spectrum in this regard, as the product is formed through an exclusive combination of physical, chemical and biological filters that protect against all of the above. Such a product can also offer intense antioxidant protection and helps to repair damage to cellular and mitochondrial DNA – the good news is that these products are safe enough for children and adults to use daily.

SHUN THE SUN

For now, your best bet is to avoid excessive UV light exposure – especially if you’re blonde or redheaded and don’t tan well.

The best way to prevent skin aging and other damaging effects from the sun is to stay out of it especially between 10am and 4pm, when the sun’s rays are strongest.

If you can’t, apply sunscreen with an SPF of 50+ freely and use about two to three tablespoons for your whole body (don’t forget the lips and ears), wear a hat and sunglasses, and cover up with clothing when outdoors.

SUN BLOCKS WORK ONLY IF THEY ARE USED EFFECTIVELY

All sunscreens should be applied 15-20 minutes before sun exposure to allow a protective film to develop and should be reapplied every two hours or after going in the water or sweating.

Also avoid deliberate tanning, including the use of indoor tanning devices.

If you notice changes to your skin such as a mole changing appearance, a new growth, or a sore that won’t heal, see a doctor right away. [👉](#)

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