

Sun protection for children

You may have already thought about provision of sun cream and hats for the children in your care, but have you ever wondered exactly what it's all about? This information has been put together to help you understand why sun protection is so important for children.

Why is it so important for parents to protect children from the sun?

We know that children's skin is naturally more delicate and prone to damage from the sun's rays. Children also spend time outdoors playing whilst young, in the strong midday sun during school lunch breaks and over the summer holidays.



The way we treat our skin in the first 21 years is crucial. If we spend this time in the sun, constantly trying to get a tan, or worse still getting sunburn then we significantly increase our risk of developing skin cancer. A tan is a response to genetic damage caused by UV rays. Even a light tan is a sign that your skin has been exposed to too much sun.

Children don't get skin cancer, so why is it such a concern? It's true that skin cancer is rare in children; but many skin cancers take years to develop. Damage to the DNA of our skin cells when young, may develop into skin cancer several decades later. The most serious type of skin cancer – melanoma - is the second most common cancer in 15 to 34 year olds.

Experts agree that reducing the amount of sun we are exposed to as children and teenagers, has a far greater impact on our skin cancer risk than a reduction as adults. Studies have found that sunburn during childhood can increase the risk of skin cancer later on in life. This is why it is important to ensure that children stay safe in the sun.



What about vitamin D?

We all need some sunlight to make enough vitamin D, but most of us get enough through casual exposure to the sun. Parents should not worry too much about short periods when their children might be out in the sun; but for longer times, the tips below will help to protect a child from burning in the sun.

Ten tips for protecting children in the sun

1. **Set good habits for the future;** teaching children safe sun habits while they are young sets a good pattern for later life.
2. **Remember you can burn in the UK;** the Great British sun is quite capable of burning your child! Take extra care at home as well as abroad.
3. **Use shade;** keep babies in complete shade: under trees, umbrellas, canopies or indoors. Provide shade for prams and buggies, if possible.
4. **Cover them up;** when outdoors, protect your child's skin with loose-fitting clothes, and a wide-brimmed hat that shades their face, neck and ears.
5. **Wear sunglasses;** buy good quality, wraparound sunglasses for children, as soon as they can wear them. Sunglasses don't have to be expensive brands.
6. **Find hats they like;** encourage children to wear hats with brims, especially if they are not wearing sunglasses. The wider the brim, the more skin will be shaded from the sun.
7. **Use sunscreen wisely;** use at least a factor 30 sun cream and choose a "broad-spectrum" brand that has a four or five-star rating. Apply to areas that cannot be protected by clothing, such as the face, ears, feet and backs of hands. Choose sunscreens that are formulated for children and babies' skin. These products are less likely to contain alcohol or fragrances that might irritate the skin and cause allergic reactions.
8. **Apply sunscreen generously and regularly;** put some on before children go outdoors. Sunscreen can easily be washed, rubbed or sweated off, so reapply often throughout the day.
9. **Don't forget school times;** remember play times and lunch breaks. Give children a hat to wear and, if they can't apply sunscreen at school, cover their exposed skin before they go. Remember that when school is out it's also important to protect your children on holiday.
10. **Lead by example;** and make sure you protect yourself too!

This information was compiled for a leaflet by Joanne Mayo, Clinical Nurse Specialist, Skin Cancer at Derby Hospitals.

Acknowledgements to SunSmart; please email: Joanne.mayo@nhs.net for further advice and information.