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Asheville M.D.: Tanning can kill you

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Elise Rackoff, M.D. / Special to the Citizen-Times

Written by Dr. Elise Rackoff Guest columnist

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This is the time of year when dermatologists see the most sunburns. The excuses vary: "Well, I thought I would only be gardening for a few minutes." Or "I didn't get sunburned at the beach last year."

The scariest? "I thought the tanning bed was safer than regular sun."

Most people want to protect themselves from aging, diabetes, cancer and heart disease. The good news is that protecting yourself from skin aging and [skin cancer](#) is easy. Sun exposure is the most preventable risk factor for skin cancer. Use a broad-spectrum sunscreen, wear protective clothing and seek shade.



ZOOM

A little science review: Sunlight consists of several types of rays that reach the Earth's surface. Ultraviolet A and ultraviolet B rays are the two primary types of light that harm the skin. UVB rays are the chief cause of sunburn and are blocked by window glass. UVA rays, however, are not blocked by window glass and cause most of the deeper damage to skin: wrinkles, age spots and skin cancer. Want to see for yourself? Google the New England Journal of Medicine's photos of a sun-damaged [truck](#) driver.

Sun protection

Avoiding sunlight altogether is, of course, almost impossible. But avoiding prolonged exposure between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. helps. Another way to think of it: If your shadow is shorter than you are, seek shade.

Water, snow and sand also reflect those UV rays, so extra caution is needed around pools, lakes and the ocean, or when out in the snow, even when in the shade and even during winter or cloudy days.

Sunscreen standards are currently getting a makeover by the Food and Drug Administration, which should help make it easier to pick the best product for you.

The most important [quality](#) in a sunscreen is "broad-spectrum," which means it will block both UVA and UVB rays. The best common ingredients to look for are titanium dioxide, zinc oxide, and mexoryl. These actually block, instead of filter, the sunlight and are more important than the SPF number.

But it is also important to apply sunscreen to dry skin at least 15 minutes before going [outdoors](#) and to reapply hourly. An SPF of 30 is plenty when following these rules.

This is the opinion of Elise Rackoff, a board-certified dermatologist at Advanced Dermatology & Skin Surgery in Asheville and a member of the Western Carolina Medical Society. She and her husband, a gastroenterologist practicing in Hendersonville, live in Arden with their daughter and son.

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Sun protective clothing is also fantastic: Pull that on, and you're done. Look for a high ultraviolet protection factor. It may be more of an investment upfront, but the fabric dries quickly, lasts for years and comes in fun colors and patterns. Better yet, there's no reapplying.

Also, Tinosorb (bisotrizole) can be added to the laundering of clothes to bind fabric, making it highly UV protective for up to 25 wash cycles.

Wide-brimmed hats and sunglasses should go without saying. Melanoma on the eyeball? It happens. Ask some of our patients.

Tanning beds

Why are tanning beds so bad? Tanning beds emit both UVA and UVB rays and have been declared a known carcinogen — cancer-causing agent — by the World Health Organization.

There is a 75 percent increase in melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer, among those who use tanning beds.

I tell the teenagers and parents in my practice that just as we wouldn't recommend smoking or getting in a car with a drunk driver, we don't recommend getting into a tanning bed. If you want to look tan, apply (but don't inhale) a sunless tanning product.

Check your skin. On your birthday, look at your birthday suit or have a physician look at it with you. See a dermatologist if you have new spots, particularly if you see anything bleeding, changing or growing.

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