Sun Protection: Making Sure Your Patients Are Covered

**BY LISE MILLAY STEVENS**  
**Contributing Writer**

NEW YORK — Several factors contribute to patients’ poor use of sun block, including vague package instructions, a lack of understanding about proper use, and the perception that a little sunscreen goes a long way, Heidi A. Waldorf, M.D., said at the Atlantic Dermatological Conference. “The analogy I use for patients is that if you have a car that has a great safety record, has airbags all over, and has been crash tested, you still shouldn’t drive 95 miles an hour on a slick road,” Dr. Waldorf of Mount Sinai School of Medicine, New York, explained. “That analogy is to say that just because you have a good sunscreen on, you shouldn’t lie out or stay out all day. Sunscreen is just part of protection.”

The proper application of sunscreen is the key to adequate protection, Dr. Waldorf said. “People generally apply only 25%-50% of the sun block needed to protect the SPF they think they are getting. A product with an SPF of 30 may be affording them an SPF of 15 or 8 if they are applying it incorrectly.” She suggested giving patients seven tips to ensure the proper use of sunscreen. (See box.)

A recent study in the Archives of Dermatology found that despite campaigns promoting early detection of skin cancer and the merits of avoiding prolonged sun exposure, the rate of the most deadly and aggressive form of melanoma has remained the same over 12 years (from 1988 through 1999). So what’s a doctor to do? Start by telling patients to cover up while in the sun. “Think of the Bedouins—they swathe themselves in clothing,” Dr. Waldorf said. It’s also important to address recent coverage about the need for sun exposure for vitamin D supplementation. “People only need 10-15 minutes of exposure a day on the tops of the hands, face, or upper back to fulfill the daily requirement. Most people will get that just running an errand or walking to their cars,” she said at the conference, sponsored by the Dermatologic Society of Greater New York.

**Seven Reminders About Effective Sunscreen Use**

1. Apply sunscreen at least 30 minutes before planned exposure.
2. Wear only a bathing suit or underwear during initial application to avoid skipping spots that may result in sunburn.
3. Reapply sunscreen within the first 30 minutes of exposure.
4. Make sure each application equals a shot glass of product (a minimum of a half teaspoon for each limb and other areas).
5. Reapply a full application of sunscreen every 1-2 hours.
6. Reapply water-resistant sun block after getting wet and toweling off.
7. Know which active ingredients to look for. The active ingredients should include zinc oxide, titanium dioxide, and avobenzone or Mexoryl. (Mexoryl is not available in U.S. products but is in products available over the Internet or abroad.)

Source: Dr. Waldorf

Higher Income, Binge Drinking, Student Status Tied to Sunburn

**BY MICHELE G. SULLIVAN**  
**Mid-Atlantic Bureau**

ST. LOUIS — Higher income, binge drinking, and student status are all independent risk factors for sunburn, Tamu Brown reported at the annual meeting of the Society for Investigative Dermatology.

“We suggest targeting young adults, students, and those with higher socioeconomic status for preventive measures,” said Ms. Brown, a medical student at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. Not only is sunburn a significant risk factor for melanoma, it has significant economic impact, Ms. Brown said. A 2003 study published in the Archives of Dermatology concluded that sunburn might account for as many as 93,000 lost work days each year in Galveston, Tex., alone (2003;139:1003-6).

Ms. Brown analyzed data from the 2003 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, a national administrative sun surveillance system wholly owned by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In the survey, sunburn was defined as sun exposure that left even a small portion of the skin reddened for at least 24 hours. The 2003 survey included more than 248,000 people; the respondents’ mean age was 45 years. Of those, almost 34% reported having had at least one sunburn within the past 12 months; 22% reported as many as three sunburns; and 8% reported four or more.

The highest prevalence of sunburn occurred in those aged 18-24 years (49%). Compared with respondents aged 45-55, this represented an increased risk of 2.6. Student status and higher socioeconomic status were also associated with an increased risk of sunburn. Ms. Brown said. Respondents with a college degree had an increased risk of 1.6, compared with those with a high school diploma. Those making more than $50,000 per year had an increased risk of 2.7, compared with those making less than $20,000 per year. Students had an increased risk of 1.4, compared with those who were unemployed.

Alcohol consumption—particularly binge drinking (more than five drinks per day anytime within the past 30 days)—was also a risk factor. The association with smoking was statistically significant but of a low magnitude, she added.