

# Does sunbathing have to be bad for your health?

**T**his spring has been one of the sunniest on record, and as we head towards "flaming June", we can look forward to even warmer weather and clearer skies. But conflicting information about the effects of sun exposure on our health may leave us all longing for cloud cover.

Warnings about the dangers of the sun are starker than ever, and skin cancer is now the most commonly diagnosed cancer in Britain. Experts at Cancer Research UK fear that rates of melanoma, the most serious form, are likely to treble in the next 30 years. However, there is also new research that suggests that some exposure to UV rays is essential for good health, and may even protect against other forms of cancer.

So how much sun do we really need? And how should we go about getting it safely?

## What are the dangers of exposure to the sun?

The Association of Dermatologists estimates that there are at least 100,000 new cases of skin cancer annually in the UK, the vast majority of which are caused by exposure to ultra violet radiation. When UV radiation penetrates skin, it causes changes in the cells that can lead to sunburn,

premature ageing, DNA damage and skin cancer.

There are two types of UV radiation: UVA is responsible for skin ageing, and UVB causes sunburn. Both are thought to be a major risk factor for skin cancer. Melanoma is now the third most common cancer among 15- to 39-year-olds, and it is especially prevalent among those who burnt as children, and those who regularly used sunbeds as teenagers.

## What are the benefits?

The healing power of the sun was acknowledged by ancient civilisations long before we had identified UV rays. It regulates our moods and sets our internal clocks. Exposure to sunshine can alleviate tiredness, increase libido and alertness, and help to ease depression. Exposure to UVB rays is also needed for the synthesis of vitamin D, which is crucial for building and maintaining strong bones. In addition, recent research has suggested that higher levels of vitamin D might help to protect the body from colon, breast, prostate and other cancers.

## How long do you need in the sun?

Sara Hiom is head of health information at Cancer Research UK, which heads the UK's Sunsmart campaign. She says that nobody really

knows exactly how much sun we need for good health, but we do know that, in this country, most of us get enough by simply going about our normal lives to avoid the diseases we associate with vitamin D deficiency, such as rickets, especially because we also get some from our diet.

"Different people need different amounts of sunlight to produce the same amount of vitamin D," she says. "The right amount will be produced before you begin to go red, so fair-skinned people need less time in the sun than darker skinned people to produce the optimum amount.

"For the average fair-skinned person, we would recommend around 15 minutes, two to three times a week, with your arms, face and maybe legs uncovered."

## If sunscreen blocks the damage, does it also bar the benefits?

Sunscreen blocks the UVB rays needed to produce vitamin D, so to get the benefit, you have to go without sunscreen. The key is to stay in the shade between the hours of 11am and 3pm, when the sun's rays are most powerful.

But, while you can't receive the sun's goodness through your sunscreen, you are still exposed to its negative effects. This is often because

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people don't apply enough sunscreen.

Dr Mark Palmer, a specialist in cosmetic dermatology, says that even when wearing factor 30, people often burn, because they have applied the lotion too thinly. "The effectiveness of sunscreens increases exponentially the more you apply, so if you use factor 30, but put on a quarter of the amount you need, you will actually only be getting a sun protection factor of two or four."

He also points out the danger of sunscreens that only protect against UVB rays. "Many products only

bar UVB rays because these are the ones that cause sunburn," he says. "But these allow people to stay in the sun all day, unaware of the huge dose of UVA rays they are receiving. Some doctors think that the dramatic increase in the number of skin cancer cases may be linked to the fact that so many people lie out in the sun, oblivious to the damage they are doing."

Zinc oxide is the only ingredient that protects against the full spectrum of UV rays and some manufacturers are now including it in their products.

Sara Hiom says the best advice is to enjoy the sun sensibly: "We're not saying you have to avoid the sun completely, just be aware of the dangers and protect your skin as carefully as you can."

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