

Health & Safety for Caregivers

HSC-7-03



Author:

**Joyce Smith, Ph.D.,
State Extension
Specialist Emeritus,
Apparel and Textiles**



Sun Safety Tips for Child Care Providers

Children enjoy playing outdoors, exploring nature, and the warmth of the sun. Being in the sun is good. It lifts the spirits and helps bodies produce and absorb Vitamin D, which builds strong bones and teeth. Most people should spend 30 minutes outdoors every day—about 15 minutes in the morning and 15 minutes in the evening. But too much of a good thing, without some precautions, can be dangerous.

Skin cancer is growing at an alarming rate in the United States. Did you know:

- 1/3 of all new cancers diagnosed in the United States are skin cancer
- 1 in 65 people born in 2001 is expected to get skin cancer in his or her lifetime, an increase from 1 in 79 people born in 1999
- the average American receives 80 percent of lifetime sun exposure before the age of 18
- most skin cancers originate from a bad sunburn received in childhood
- children who have had a bad sunburn double their risk of getting skin cancer; if blistering or peeling occurred, the risk of skin cancer triples

Ultraviolet (UV) rays from the sun damage the skin. This skin damage accumulates over a lifetime. It cannot be reversed, just stopped from getting worse. Once an area of the skin is damaged, it is a weak spot. Continued UV ray exposure to that weakened spot eventually causes skin cells to break down. These are unable to mend and abnormal cells develop causing skin cancer.

Protect the children in your care from the damaging rays of the sun and help them develop sun safe habits early in life.

Sun Safety Strategies for Children

Reduce Sun Exposure

- Limit time in sun between 10:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. when the sun's rays are the strongest.
- Encourage children to play in shaded areas during midday.
- Use the shadow test. When your child's shadow is shorter than he or she is, a sunburn is likely. So encourage children to play in the shade.
- Beware of cloudy days; 80 percent of the sun's rays penetrate the clouds.
- Be careful at high altitudes or around water where burning occurs more quickly.

Wear Protective Clothing

- Have children wear sun safe hats. These feature a 3-inch brim that shades the face, ears, and back of neck. Eighty percent of skin cancers are in the head and neck areas. Find a hat that is colorful, fun, and easy to keep on so your child will wear it. Baseball style caps are not sun safe.
- Wear shirts or tops that cover the upper back and shoulders.
- Dark colored shirts filter more UV rays than white or light colored shirts, but they are hotter to wear.

- Consider special UV resistant clothing for children who burn easily. This clothing blocks more than 90 percent of the sun's rays.
- Washing clothing on a regular basis in home laundry detergents with optical brighteners significantly increases the UV protection of most clothing.

Use Sun Screen

- Have children wear sun screen with an SPF (sun protection factor) of 15 or more, preferably 30.
- Apply sun screen 30 minutes before the children go outdoors.
- Do not use sun screen on infants under six months. Keep them covered and in the shade when outdoors.
- Use sensitive skin sun screens or those developed especially for children.
- Consider sun screens for children with glitter or in colors, such as blue or purple. Children think these are fun. Besides they can be seen when being applied to avoid missing areas.
- Read labels on all sun screens, especially those with insecticides to repel mosquitoes. Many should not be used on children.
- Reapply sun screens if children are sweating a lot, wiping off their faces, or swimming.
- Consider sun screen "sticks," similar to stain sticks. They are convenient to carry in purses or diaper bags, as well as easy to apply.

Other Strategies

- *Sun Sensitive Patches:* To help monitor the amount of time spent in the sun, consider sun-sensitive patches. The small (1" x 1") patches can be placed on the body much like an adhesive bandage. When they turn a certain color, this signals that it is time to come in or apply more sun screen. Patches come in regular or sensitive skin varieties. Use the latter for children.
- *Sunglasses:* As children reach the toddler or pre-kindergarten stage, add sunglasses to outdoor fun for sunny days. Sunglasses protect the lids and lens of the eyes, but be sure to select sunglasses that have an ultraviolet ray protective film.

- *UV Index:* The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency reports the UV level daily, rating it from minimal to very high exposures. Some radio and television stations report this, but you can find it on the internet at www.epa.gov/sunwise. While you are at this site, check out several of the materials on sun safety developed for children. These include *Mission Sun Wise* (EPA430-K-00001) and *Mission Sun Wise Activity Book* (EPA 430-K-00002). Both are available in English and Spanish versions.

Keep in Mind

- People in general, including children, with fair skin, red or blond hair, and hazel, blue, or green eyes are at exceptionally high risk for sun damage and skin cancer.
- Darker skinned persons, such as African Americans, are less likely to get skin cancer but do experience sun damage and can get skin cancer.
- Medications can make children and adults especially sensitive to the sun. These include antibiotics, antihistamines, and acne medications.
- Avoid scaring children. The sun is good for them, but some protection is needed to prevent or reduce skin damage.

Providing the best care for young children involves helping them develop good habits early in life. **Be a good model yourself.** Wear a sun safe hat, use sun screen, and cover up when in the sun for long periods. And avoid using tanning booths. Modeling good behavior and being a good example is the best way to develop sun safe behaviors in your children.

Reference

National Cancer Research Institute: www.cancer.gov.