

Sun safety for children

Is the sun harmful to children?

Children have sensitive skin that can easily be damaged by exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation (rays) of the sun, even on cloudy or overcast days. Too much sun exposure can cause sunburns, heat stroke/heat exhaustion, skin cancers, cataracts and other eye diseases. During the warm summer months, a child's sensitive skin can also be burned by touching hot surfaces such as the pavement, outdoor metal slides or car doors.

Research has shown that exposure to UV radiation can also affect the immune system, leading to greater risk of infections and reduced vaccine effectiveness. The sun can also cause premature aging and damage to skin.

Given outdoor play, much of our exposure to UV rays occurs before we are 18 years of age. By the time we are adults, many of us have soaked up more than enough UV rays to cause skin cancer. By protecting children from sunburns and too much sun exposure, you can significantly reduce their risk of developing skin cancer.

How can I protect my child from sun exposure?

Try to keep toddlers and children out of the sun during the peak hours of 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. This is when the sun is the strongest. When you are outside, look for trees and other naturally shady areas for children to play. If possible, use a sun umbrella if you can't find a shady spot. If you cannot keep your child out of the sun, make sure to protect their skin with "sun smart" clothing and sunscreen.

Sun smart clothing

Encourage your child to be "sun-smart." Make sure they cover up with loose, appropriate clothes. Closely-woven cotton material offers natural protection from the sun. If you can see through the clothing easily, then UV rays can get through too. A long-sleeved shirt and pants are the best clothes to

protect the skin. A wide-brimmed hat without ties, especially one that covers the neck, is recommended. Avoid baseball caps that do not shade the ears or back of the neck. You may consider purchasing lightweight, sun-protective swimsuits and hats that are specially designed for swimming and playing outside.

Sunscreen

Dermatologists strongly recommend a sunscreen with UVA and UVB protection and a Sun Protection Factor (SPF) of 30 or more if you and your child are out in the sun. Use a lip balm with SPF 30 as well. Make sure to use products approved by the Canadian Dermatology Association (look for their name or logo on the label).

For a small number of children, the chemicals in some sunscreens can trigger a skin rash or burn when exposed to the sun. Do a patch test on a small area of skin before applying the product more widely, or use a mineral-based sunscreen that contains zinc or titanium to minimize the risk of a skin reaction.

Apply sunscreen 30 minutes before exposure to the sun so it is absorbed by the skin and less likely to rub or wash off. Apply the sunscreen according to instructions on the package and reapply every couple of hours, after swimming, or following active play time. Swimmers and those who sweat heavily should use a waterproof lotion.

For children wearing bathing suits, make sure that sunscreen is applied up to and under the edges of the suit to protect sensitive areas, such as the upper thighs and chest. Pay particular attention to the ears, back of the neck, tops of feet and the back of the knees. Be careful when applying sunscreen near the eyes. It can be irritating, so avoid the upper and lower eyelids.

Sunscreens, like many other products, have a limited shelf life and become less effective over time. Check the expiry date of old sunscreen containers and replace them if they are out of date.

Do I need to take extra precautions to protect my baby from the sun and heat?

Yes. Babies younger than 12 months of age are especially sensitive to UV radiation and heat. It is safest to keep babies younger than 12 months out of the sun. Try to find or create shade for your baby if you are going to be outside. Use a stroller with a sunshade if possible. If your baby must be in the sun, you can apply sunscreen to small areas of skin that aren't covered by clothing or a hat. Sunscreen is not recommended for babies less than six months of age as they can rub it in their eyes and mouth. Make sure to use a sunscreen approved by the Canadian Dermatology Association.

Do not let your baby get dehydrated or overheated. Make sure your baby is well hydrated in hot weather by offering breastmilk or something to drink every hour or so. Never leave your child alone in the car.

Should I protect my child's eyes from the sun?

Yes. The same UV rays that harm your child's skin can also injure their eyes. Babies and children are particularly at risk. Standards for sunglasses have improved, and most brands are effective at screening or reflecting ultraviolet rays. Look for sunglasses that provide 99 to 100 per cent UVA and UVB protection.

When buying sunglasses, see how well they cover the eyes. Large lenses, glasses that fit well, and a wrap-around design all help protect against damaging UV rays. Have your clear plastic or glass corrective lenses checked for UV protection.

What are other risks?

Skin cancer can develop in any skin type. Be extra careful with children who are fair-skinned and/or who have blond or red hair. They are more likely to burn easily and are most at risk of developing skin cancer later in life.

Most of the sun's damaging UV rays can penetrate light cloud cover and haze, so remember to protect your child even if it is cloudy or does not feel hot. UV rays reflect off many of the surfaces around us.

Up to 80 per cent of the sun's UV rays can be reflected off snow. Concrete, sand and water reflect less than 20 per cent. Children always need to be "sun-smart" whether they are skiing, swimming, playing or walking outdoors.

What are other sun safety tips?

- Always protect your child's skin and try to stay indoors or in the shade during the hottest time of day (10 a.m. to 4 p.m.)
- If you have to go out in the sun without protective clothing, use sunscreen. Do not forget to apply it to ears, nose, and neck
- Sunscreen is intended to enhance protection during periods of sun exposure – not to increase time of sun exposure
- Do not wait for signs of sunburn to get your child out of the sun, Sunburns do not usually show up for 6 to 24 hours
- A tan does not provide enough protection against the sun's rays. Actually, having a tan means that your skin has been damaged already by UV radiation
- Teach children to be "sun-smart" and to protect themselves against exposure to the sun
- Encourage your child to drink plenty of water
- Indoor tanning beds and/or sun lamps are regulated by provincial law that does not allow children under 18 years old to use them. At any age, these devices damage your skin the same way UV radiation from the sun does

For more information

For more information, see the following resources:

- [HealthLinkBC File #11 Ultraviolet radiation](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #35 Heat-related illness](#)
- Canadian Dermatology Association: <https://dermatology.ca/recognized-products/sunscreen/>



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