



Stay safe in the sun

As summer arrives, **David Hughes** reports on tanning without tears

AS I'M writing this, news comes that Spain is opening its borders for holidaymakers from this month, no doubt to be followed by other Mediterranean destinations. So once again there'll be the opportunity to spend a sun-soaked couple of weeks somewhere hot this year, not that Britain may be a slouch in the temperature stakes either.

After a year spent largely out of the sun, however, it's easy to forget that when it comes to sunlight, we can have too much of a good thing. Sunshine is good for our health - but too much of it may do us harm.

The healing powers of sunlight were recognised long before the first package tours. Ancient Greek physician Hippocrates, often called the father of medicine, is said to have constructed a solarium so that his patients could have the benefit of sunlight as part of their treatment.

Serotonin

Exposure to sunlight makes us feel better, and it makes us look better as well – most people find a tanned look is more attractive.

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Having a sunny outlook on life is not just a metaphor – serotonin, a neurotransmitter linked to wakefulness and happiness, is increased by sunlight. Exposure to the sun also helps regulate balanced production of melatonin, helping us to sleep well at night, further improving mood. Sunlight also stimulates white and red blood cell production, aiding circulation, and has a beneficial effect on skin ailments including eczema and psoriasis.

Perhaps most significantly, sunlight stimulates Vitamin D production, which helps the body regulate the immune system, a subject which has been particularly topical in the past year. Vitamin D helps

cognitive functions, and may help prevent Alzheimer's disease, and is also a factor in developing stronger bones, helping avoid arthritis and osteoporosis.

So far so good. Sunlight is wonderful – in the right doses.

But too much sun can have the opposite

Who should take extra care in the sun?

You should take extra care in the sun if you:

- have pale, white or light brown skin
- have freckles or red or fair hair
- tend to burn rather than tan
- have many moles
- have skin problems relating to a medical condition
- are only exposed to intense sun occasionally (for example, while on holiday)
- are in a hot country where the sun is particularly intense
- have a family history of skin cancer

Source: NHS

appearance, promoting wrinkled and ageing skin, and at the worst, causing skin cancers. It's all a matter of the right amount, as with any medicine.

Timing

And as with many medicines, timing is important. Sunlight is strongest between about 10am and 3pm, so limiting exposure during those hours is one precaution we can take.

And how long should we lie in the sun to get a good tan? That depends on our skin type. People with lighter skin have less melanin, the pigment responsible for tanning which is found in the skin, and hair, and so they will tend to get sunburned more easily. Darker skin will be more resistant to burning.

But in recent years, scientists have found that our bodies respond much more quickly to sunlight than used to be thought, and start producing melanin.

“As soon as you step out into the sun, your skin knows that it is exposed to UV radiation,” said Elena Oancea, senior author of a study conducted at Brown University in the USA.

Sunscreen

Rather than lying all day in the sun, dermatologists suggest that the best way to get a healthy glow is to tan in small doses, no longer than half an hour to an hour per day. And, importantly, wear a high-factor sun screen (at least SPF 30), applied 15 minutes beforehand, and again about 15 to 30 minutes after exposure to the sun. The NHS website suggests that most people do not apply enough sunscreen. It recommends that adults should aim to apply “two teaspoons of sunscreen if you're just covering your head, arms and neck”,



and “two tablespoons if you're covering your entire body while wearing a swimming costume”. Best to err on the side of caution. Too much is better than too little.

Get ahead, get a hat

Wearing sunglasses and a hat is also good: the skin around the eyes, and the eyes themselves, are delicate and can be adversely affected by too much strong sunlight, leading to age-related macular degeneration and other problems. Choose sunglasses which block almost all UV rays, and preferably are wraparound, protecting the eyes from different angles.

Wide-brimmed hats are good – and looking like Indiana Jones is no bad thing either. Remember the neck as well, the back of which is easily sunburned as it's usually exposed whether we're on the beach or not, and out of sight, out of mind. Reapply sunscreen, and maybe choose a hat with fabric covering the neck (the Foreign Legion wore those for a reason).

Another tip is to allow our skin time to repair itself after being in the sun. If we're spending one day primarily on the beach, maybe spend the next one on a less sun-exposed activity. And within that beach day, take frequent breaks in the shade. Exfoliating the skin before sunbathing can result in a more even tan, and applying cooling aloe vera lotion afterwards may result in the tan lasting longer.

Tanning beds

Tempting though it might be to use a tanning bed to start a tan, or top up one after a holiday, expert opinion is firmly against doing so. The NHS website cites the World Health Organisation's International Agency for Research on Cancer, which categorises tanning beds as carcinogenic,

Sun precautions

Spending time in the sun can be made safer if we take some precautions, says the NHS. It recommends tanning for a very short period, drinking water, wearing sunscreen with a SPF of at least 30 on skin and lips, and protecting our eyes.

Avoid:

- falling asleep in the sun
- wearing an SPF of less than 30
- drinking alcohol, which can be dehydrating

Don't forget to:

- Reapply sunscreen every two hours and after going in water.
- Apply SPF to your scalp, the tops of your feet, ears, and other places you can easily miss.
- Roll over frequently so you tan evenly without burning.
- Drink plenty of water, wear a hat, and protect your eyes by wearing sunglasses.

Source: NHS

and quotes Harvard Health that tanning beds emit UVA rays up to three times more intense than natural sunlight. Tanning beds should be avoided, they conclude. “Safer alternatives include spray tans or tanning lotion, which use dihydroxyacetone (DHA) to darken the skin.”

Eat yourself tanned

Finally, it might be worth choosing some foods rich in lycopene, and beta carotene. Lycopene helps protect the skin against UV rays – foods include tomatoes, guava and watermelon. Some studies show that beta carotene may help tanning without burning – foods include kale, carrots and sweet potatoes.

Sunburn

If, despite dressing like the Foreign Legion and eating carrots and kale, we still suffer from sunburn, NHS advice is to sponge the sore skin with cool water, and apply soothing creams like aloe vera. Painkillers such as paracetamol can help reduce inflammation, and it's best to stay out of the sun until redness has gone.

Happy holidays...