

Skin Cancer and Sun Protection: Looking After Your Skin

As the weather gets warmer, many of us enjoy spending more time outdoors. Sunshine can boost our mood and help our bodies make vitamin D, but too much exposure to ultraviolet (UV) rays from the sun can damage our skin and increase the risk of skin cancer.

The good news is that there are simple steps you can take to protect yourself and your family.

What is skin cancer?

Skin cancer is one of the most common types of cancer in the UK. It happens when skin cells become damaged, often after years of exposure to UV radiation from the sun or sunbeds.

There are two main types:

- **Non-melanoma skin cancer** – the most common type, which usually grows slowly and is often very treatable if found early.
- **Melanoma** – a less common but more serious type of skin cancer that can spread to other parts of the body if not diagnosed and treated promptly.

Who is at risk?

Anyone can develop skin cancer, but your risk is higher if you:

- Have fair skin that burns easily.
- Have red or blonde hair, or light-coloured eyes.
- Have lots of moles or freckles.
- Have had severe sunburn, especially during childhood.
- Spend a lot of time in the sun through work or hobbies.
- Use sunbeds.
- Have a family history of melanoma.
- Have a weakened immune system.

Even if you have darker skin, you can still develop skin cancer, so sun protection is important for everyone.

How can I protect myself?

The NHS recommends spending time in the shade during the hottest part of the day, usually between **11am and 3pm** during the summer months.

You can also:

- Wear clothing that covers your shoulders and skin where possible.
- Wear a wide-brimmed hat to protect your face, ears and neck.
- Wear sunglasses with good UV protection.
- Use sunscreen with at least **SPF 30** and **4-star or 5-star UVA protection**.
- Apply sunscreen generously 15–30 minutes before going outside and reapply every two hours, or more often if swimming or sweating.
- Take extra care with young children, whose skin is particularly sensitive.

Remember that sunscreen is important, but it should not be used as a way to stay in the sun for longer.

Don't forget the UK sun

Many people associate sunburn with holidays abroad, but UV rays in the UK can be strong enough to damage your skin from around March to October, especially on bright days.

Clouds do not block all UV rays, so it's still possible to burn on an overcast day.

Check your skin regularly

Getting to know your skin makes it easier to notice changes early.

Look out for:

- A new mole or mark that doesn't look like your others.
- A mole that changes in size, shape or colour.
- A mole that becomes itchy, painful, crusty or starts bleeding.
- A sore that doesn't heal after several weeks.
- A patch of skin that continues to scab, bleed or crust.

Using the **ABCDE** guide can help identify concerning moles:

- **A – Asymmetry:** One half doesn't match the other.
- **B – Border:** The edges are uneven or irregular.
- **C – Colour:** There are different shades or colours.
- **D – Diameter:** The mole is larger than about 6 mm, although melanomas can be smaller.

- **E – Evolving:** The mole is changing over time.

Not every change is skin cancer, but it is always worth getting checked.

When should I contact the GP?

Please book an appointment if you notice:

- A new or changing mole.
- A skin lesion that is growing.
- A sore that does not heal.
- Any patch of skin that repeatedly bleeds or crusts without an obvious cause.

Early diagnosis makes treatment much more effective, so it is always better to seek advice if you are concerned.

Sunbeds are not a safe alternative

Sunbeds expose your skin to harmful UV radiation and increase the risk of developing skin cancer. There is no such thing as a "safe tan" from a sunbed.

A final reminder

Enjoying time outdoors is good for both physical and mental wellbeing. By taking a few simple precautions, you can reduce your risk of skin cancer while still making the most of sunny days.

Protect your skin, check it regularly, and if you notice anything unusual, please contact the practice for advice. We are here to help.

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