

Children at Risk of Skin Cancer

Childhood should be a playful, carefree time. The unfortunate reality, however, is that the time that children spend playing outdoors may put them at risk of developing skin cancer.

Skin cancer is a disease caused by exposure to the sun's ultraviolet radiation. It's extremely important that we protect our children's delicate skin from the sun's damaging rays, minimizing their chance of developing skin cancer later on in life.

Children must learn the facts about skin cancer. By learning at an early age about the dangers of the sun, our kids will be better prepared to protect themselves for a lifetime. The more that children experience unprotected exposure to the sun, the more likely they are to suffer from permanent skin damage or even skin cancer.

Sun damage can strike at the earliest age. The first time a child experience sun exposure, he or she is considered to be at risk for melanoma, the most dangerous type of skin cancer. It only takes a single blistering sunburn during childhood to double the risk of melanoma later in life. Remember to prevent your children's skin becoming sun burnt, and reduce their unprotected exposure to the sun as much as possible. In doing so, you will be able to decrease their chances of developing skin cancer in adulthood.

Fair haired or redheaded children and those with freckles and green or blue eyes are most at risk of developing skin cancer. However, it is possible for those with darker pigment and complexions to become afflicted with this terrible disease, including children of African or Hispanic descent.

If anyone in your family has a history of melanoma, it's important that you pay particular attention to the welfare of your children. Today, more and more teenagers are being diagnosed with skin cancer than ever before. This frightful trend includes diagnoses of melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer.

Children and teens naturally love to be independent, making their own choices about everything and anything. That's why it's so important for you to be a good role model. Begin practicing safe sun routines when your children are infants, and they will grow up with the knowledge and understanding needed to make their own smart choices. Teach your children to wear hats and sunscreen, and explain to them why it's important to avoid tanning salons. Even the artificial sunlight created by tanning beds can put your skin, and your children's skin, at risk.

The following "safe sun" methods can help protect your children from dangerous sunburn:

- * Try to avoid outdoor activities during peak sunlight hours. Children should restrict outdoor play to before 11 am and after 3 pm. The sun's UV rays are strongest during the midday and early afternoon hours, and skin is much more likely to burn.
- * The sun is just as dangerous on cool and cloudy days. Just because you can't feel the heat from UV rays, doesn't mean there are no dangerous rays present. It is possible to get sunburn when the weather is cool. Even skiers must protect themselves on the coldest winter days.
- * In summer, dress your children in lightweight protective clothing, and insist that they wear broad-brimmed hats to protect their face, neck and ears. This will reduce their direct exposure to harmful UV rays by 50%.
- * Your children must wear sunscreen or sun block with an SPF of 30 or higher. Waterproof formulas offer the best degree of prolonged protection, even when children swim or work up a sweat playing outdoors.
- * Look for protective clothing made of close woven fabrics. These types of fabrics block the UV rays and keep the sunlight from seeping through.
- * Plan activities in shady areas, so that children will be encouraged to play there. Of course, UV rays are able to reflect themselves onto your children, so hats and sunscreens are still important, even in the shade.

As parents, we need to take every precaution to protect our children. Making wise choices for outdoor protection is a lesson that children can and should learn at an early age, so they'll continue to be "sun smart" as teens and adults as well.