Hello, Alice!

As the summer is soon to arrive, I was wondering what type of clothing should I wear to protect myself from the sun? Also, what color works best, light or black? I seem to be getting conflicting answers on the Internet. I am a fair skinned male. Thanks for your help!

Answer

Dear Reader,

Your proactive approach towards sun protection is exemplary! As you mentioned, summer is a time when people are especially at risk for sun damage due to the temptation to beat the heat by wearing less clothing. To provide a quick answer, clothing that covers more skin, is dry, made from a thicker fabric, and has a tight knit is especially helpful in protecting yourself from the sun’s ultraviolet (UV) rays. In terms of color, research has shown that darker colors, like black, tend to protect against UV rays better than lighter colors. There are also a few additional factors to think about when trying to find the most effective protection from the sun.

The sun’s UV rays are strongest in the middle of the day, which is why the American Cancer Society [2] recommends staying in the shade or indoors between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., if possible. When out in the sun, the three possible ways to protect the body from UV rays are to block, filter, or absorb them. Sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15 is an effective way to filter out UV rays, but it doesn’t block the rays completely. That’s where clothing, hats, and sunglasses come in handy.
Depending on the type, some clothes have the ability to block, filter, or even absorb the sun's rays. Sunglasses (with labels that specify UV protection), hats (preferably with brims that are two to three inches wide), and some fabrics can actually block out UV rays, which is why covering up is better than simply using sunscreen on bare skin alone. Just like SPF describes how much a sunscreen filters the UV rays when applied to the skin, the ability for fabric and clothing to filter UV rays is measured by a unit called ultraviolet protection factor (UPF). Tighter knits, thicker fabrics, and darker colors all increase the amount that clothes or hats protect the skin from UV rays. If clothing items have a UPF rating of 15 or higher - meaning 1/15th or less of the UV rays penetrate the clothes and reach the skin - it can be labeled and marketed as sun-protective. You might also be interested to know that some companies are now making clothes with an added ability to absorb UV rays more than regular clothes would and bear specific UPF ratings.

Wearing clothes, hats, and sunglasses that block as many UV rays as possible are a crucial part of one’s summer sun protection strategy. To help keep track of the best ways to protect skin from the sun, the American Cancer Society has updated an Australian campaign to remind everyone to: ‘Slip! Slop! Slap!® And Wrap,’ referring to:

- ‘Slip’ on a shirt
- ‘Slop’ on sunscreen
- ‘Slap’ on a hat
- ‘Wrap’ on sunglasses

Some people may be concerned that covering up will limit the body’s ability to produce vitamin D. The good news is that getting a little extra vitamin D-rich food in your diet can usually compensate for the lack of sun exposure. So, with adequate coverage and protection, having some outside time doesn’t have to harm your skin or limit your fun in the sun. One last point, Reader, is that although you have reason to be concerned about your fair skin and susceptibility to sun damage, people with all shades of skin benefit from protecting their skin against the sun’s UV rays. If you ever have concerns about potential sun damage, consider making an appointment with a dermatologist or your health care provider.

Here’s to donning some stylish threads while enjoying the summer sun!

Alice!

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