Dear Alice,

I am African-American, but my skin is not that dark. I was never told that I needed sunscreen and when I worked in a daycare I was told in a very delicate manner that only the paler children needed sunscreen. I’ve been out in the sun for extended periods of time and was wondering if sunscreen is necessary for someone of my complexion. If so, what strength?

Answer

Dear Reader,

As a general rule of thumb, everyone should wear sunscreen with at least SPF 15 on a daily basis, regardless of skin color. Although melanoma and other skin cancers are more common among fair-skinned folks, overexposure to the sun can be harmful for people of all skin tones. For the best protection, slick on some sunscreen anytime you head outside.

Contrary to popular belief, darker skinned people are not immune to sun damage. The sun's powerful rays penetrate all skin types, causing damage to skin cells that may eventually lead to skin cancer. The myth that only paler people need to use sunscreen may stem from the fact that melanoma and other skin cancers are more common among racial and ethnic groups with fair skin. For example, in 2011 the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported about 27 cases of melanoma among every 100,000 white male Americans (white females comprised about 17 cases for every 100,000), compared to less than nine cases per 100,000 people in male and female Hispanics, American Indians, and Alaska Natives. Melanoma rates were even lower for blacks and Asian/Pacific Islander groups.

The good news is that sunscreen products with sun protection factor (SPF) filter out the sun's harmful rays to protect against cancer and other skin damage. The higher the SPF, the more rays you avoid, and the healthier your skin stays. Though the minimum recommendation for sunscreen is SPF 15, the American Academy of Dermatology recommends that everyone, no matter what skin color, use sunscreen with SPF 30 or higher every day which blocks about 97 percent of the sun’s rays. Since excessive sun exposure also accelerates the skin's aging process, wearing sunscreen can prevent wrinkles, sagging skin, and age spots. To reduce your risk of skin cancer and other sun damage, follow these tips:

- **Choose your sunscreen wisely.** Select a broad-spectrum sunscreen that protects against UVA and UVB rays and is water-resistant (for either 40 or 80 minutes). The active ingredients will also help you determine which product will provide the best
protection. Check the ingredient list for oxybenzone, sulisobenzone, avobenzone (Parsol 1789), ecamsule, cinoxate, menthyl anthranilate, octyl methoxycinnamate, octyl salicylate, titanium dioxide, or zinc oxide. You might also want to avoid products with added fragrance or dye that may aggravate your skin.

- **More is better!** Slather on about one ounce (a shot glass full) of sunscreen to all exposed body parts 30 minutes before going outside, and then reapply at least every two hours. If you’ve gone swimming or are extra sweaty, you may need to reapply sooner.
- **Accessorize.** Don a wide-brimmed hat, sunglasses, and/or darker cover-up clothing for extra sun protection.
- **Take cover.** Seek out a shady spot or avoid being outside from 10 A.M. to 2 P.M. when the sun’s rays are strongest.
- **Use SPF even when it’s cloudy out.** UV light can pass through the clouds, so using these types of protection measures are recommended even when the sun isn’t out, all year round.

Even if your skin doesn't burn or you have a darker complexion, sunscreen is still recommended. As long as you lather on the SPF, you can still have fun in the sun!

Alice!
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