

Seven Deadly Suns

The myths and facts about sunbathing and sunscreen



1. MYTH: I sit in the safety of the shade, never in direct sunlight so don't need to use sun protection.

FACT: The damaging UV rays from the sun are reflected from sand, sea, snow, water and other surfaces and so sun damage can occur whilst you are sitting in the shade. Regardless of whether you are in the shade or fully exposed to the sun's rays, you must take sun protection seriously and use an SPF 30 or above. The SPF refers to the relative protection against sunburn that you will receive from a product compared to not applying it. So sunscreens with a higher SPF offer more protection. However, SPF only refers to protection against UVB rays (burning) and it is the UVA exposure which is increasingly linked to long term sun damage and skin cancer. When it comes to applying sun cream, it should be applied 30 minutes before exposure to the sun, re-applied every two hours and immediately after swimming or vigorous exercise. Remember to apply sun cream after towelling as this will almost certainly remove most of the traces of existing sun cream. It is also recommended to apply sunscreen liberally, using approximately three tablespoons for an average sized adult.

2. MYTH: Water resistant products protect me while I am in the water and I don't need to re-apply them when I sunbathe.

FACT: Water resistant products do afford protection in the water, but you need to take care. Depending on how long you are in the water and what activities you may do, the sun cream may be totally or partially lost; it almost certainly will be removed when you towel yourself dry. The only safe advice is to regularly re-apply the sun cream, especially after towelling. Many people do not realize how much sun damage they are getting when they are in, or near, the water. This is because the cooling effect of the water lessens the warning usually caused by the sun's heat, but does not reduce the light incident on the skin. Equally, many parents paddle in the water whilst safe-guarding their children and do not think about protecting themselves from the incident and reflected light they are exposed to. Always ensure that you use a water resistant SPF 30 or above and remember to re-apply it straight after swimming. Taking extra care with children is vital and make sure they wear T-shirts for extra protection whilst swimming.

3. MYTH: My skin never burns so I won't get any long term skin damage.

FACT: It is the total lifetime exposure to the sun's rays that is proportional to the risk of a skin cancer occurring, not necessarily episodes of sunburn, although these will heighten the risk. All exposure to the sun will add to the overall risk of a cancer occurring. Even if exposure to the sun doesn't manifest itself as sunburn, exposure to damaging UVA increases your risk of long-term skin damage. Research shows that unprotected sun exposure in the first 15 years of a child's life significantly increases the risk of skin cancer later. It is true that the extra pigment in darker skin does afford some added protection against the sun's harmful UV rays and that the skin is slightly less susceptible to burning.

4. MYTH: I do not need to use a sunscreen when the weather is cooler.

FACT: When it is cool but bright, there are still lots of UV rays so sun protection all year round is a must. Even in relatively sun-free countries like Britain, it can take as little as half an hour to get sunburn, posing a serious threat to your health in the long term. It is also important to remember that sun exposure that does not result in burning can still cause damage to the skin cells and increase your risk of developing skin cancer. Skin cancer is the most common cancer in the UK and melanoma is rising faster than any other type of deadly cancer. Don't assume that because you live in a cooler climate there is little risk of sun damage. Skin damage can occur even from exposure on cloudy, rainy or overcast days.

5. MYTH: Sunscreens with a high SPF prevent damage from the sun's rays.

FACT: The higher the SPF number the more protection there is from burning caused by UVB radiation. Whilst sunburn is mainly caused by UVB rays, research now shows that UVA rays may be just as, if not more, important in causing premature skin ageing and skin cancer. Although broad-spectrum sunscreens give protection against both, product labelling can be misleading with the product possibly offering very low UVA protection. The UVA Star Rating System gives a good indication of the quality of protection against UVA rays, with one star being a low level of protection and five-stars being the highest level of UVA protection that you can get and this is better than those products making the new 'broad spectrum protection' claim, whilst not stating their actual UVA protection level.

6. MYTH: I never sunbathe, so my skin will never be damaged by the sun.

FACT: Many cases of sunburn happen when people are not deliberately sunbathing. According to the Skin Cancer Working Party, individuals who develop skin cancer do not always have a history of deliberate sunbathing. Those who have an outdoor occupation and / or recreation such as golfing, gardening, skiing or sailing are also at risk and must learn to protect their skin. People are also living longer and so their lifetime sun exposure is greater. They often have more time and money for outdoor recreation and holidays in sunny climates and although many people actively choose not to sunbathe they are still putting themselves at risk. It is likely that most skin damage from ultraviolet radiation occurs during childhood and it is thought that a build-up of over-exposure to the sun over a period of several years can in the future lead to the development of skin cancer.

7. MYTH: I use fake tan regularly which gives me a lovely golden brown colour so I don't feel the need to cover up and protect my skin in the sun

FACT: Using fake tan products is a great way to achieve that bronzed goddess look – but don't be fooled when stepping out into the sun. Most tanning products do not offer protection against sunlight, so you still need to use sun protection and follow all of the safety tips as normal when you're out in the sun. As well as your tanning cream, ensure that you slap on some sun protection when out and about. Experts recommend using an SPF 30 or above. Not only will this help to reduce your risks of developing cancer but it will also help to protect your skin from premature ageing – which no amount of fake tan will be able to hide!

The Seven Deadly Skin Cancer Facts

- Skin cancer is the most common cancer in the UK
- More people die from skin cancer in the UK than Australia
- Malignant melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer is one of the most common cancers in young adults (aged 15-34) in the UK
- Over 11,500 cases of malignant melanoma are diagnosed every year
- Over the last twenty-five years, rates of malignant melanoma in Britain have risen faster than any other common cancer
- 80% of all skin cancers are caused by over-exposure to the sun and/or sunbeds
- Over 2,500 people will die from the disease this year alone

