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no need for summertime worries



by natalie medigovich

WITH THE ONSET OF BEAUTIFUL WEATHER, more

people tend to venture outdoors during this time of year. A few, however, fear the worst with increased exposure to the elements, ranging from sunburn to contracting diseases like West Nile Virus and rarely go out into the wonderful freedom known as mother nature. These worriers could be missing out on their favorite stress-reducing healthy activities.

There are many precautions people can take to ensure their summers are as enjoyable as possible. Employing common sense, like using insect repellent and sunscreen are just the beginning for enjoying the season. There is new information about how sunlight can positively affect moods as well as give us vitamin D; and heck it's fun to play outside!

BEWARE OF THE SUN

According to the National Safety Council's Environmental Health Center, sunburn, skin cancers and other sun-related adverse health effects are largely preventable when sun protection is practiced early and consistently. The most important thing to remember is to limit sun exposure during the time the sun's rays are strongest, from 10am to 4pm, whenever possible. Many people don't realize the majority of sun damage occurs as a result of incidental exposure during

day-to-day activities like walking to the mailbox or watching a soccer game, not from a day at the beach.

Your shadow, or lack thereof, can also be an excellent indicator of the sun's intensity; the shorter your shadow, the higher the sun is in the sky (meaning it is more intense when directly overhead). The American Academy of Dermatology established the Shadow Rule: No Shadow Seek Shade.

Now that doesn't mean you can't go swimming at those times, only that it's not a great idea – even with the best sunscreen.

Everyone should use sunscreens with a Sun Protection Factor (SPF) of at least 15. The label on the container should also say "full spectrum protection" or "blocks out UVA and UVB rays".

Make sure you also wear sunglasses that block both rays.

Babies younger than six months should not use sunscreen and thus should not ever be in direct sun. Older children can and should wear a higher SPF formula, such as SPF 30 or 45, especially if they are fair skinned or light haired, or have moles. Formulas containing titanium dioxide are beneficial for people with sensitive skin.

Most children get an average of three times the amount of sun exposure as adults, racking up 50% - 80% of their lifetime exposure to the sun by age 18. It is important to know that just one or two blistering sunburns in childhood can double a person's risk of developing a melanoma later in life. Photo aging of the skin is cumulative, so it is never too late to start protecting yourself. There is also research showing prolonged sun exposure compromises the body's immune system, another reason to limit your exposure to the sun's intense rays whenever possible.

A common misconception that on cloudy days no sunscreen is needed is simply untrue. Apply your choice of sunscreen liberally every time you are outside, and when possible, at least 20 - 30 minutes before exposure to the sun so the skin can absorb it. Remember to reapply after sweating or swimming. There is also no such thing as a healthy tan; especially from a tanning bed, which can damage the skin even more than the sun because the radiation penetrates deeper. It is extra important to remember to protect lips, hands, and feet and behind the neck and shoulders, and to move bathing suits straps and apply the sunscreen underneath to accommodate movement.

BEAT THE BUGS

What sunscreen does for sunburn, insect repellent does for bug bites. Covering up your exposed skin with a light layer of tightly woven clothing (i.e., you can't see your hand through it if you hold it up to a light) can help a lot with both situations. Never apply insect repellent under

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*Water balloons in the backyard with Jackson Todd.
photo by Chris Johnson*

clothing. There was a scare some time ago about risks associated with using repellents with DEET, approved for public use by the US Department of Agriculture in 1957, but research has shown it is by far the most effective and longest lasting ingredient to look for when you want to avoid mosquitoes, tics, and other like nuisances.

Like sunscreen, the higher the concentration number on the container, the longer the product will last. According to the Environmental Protection Agency adults can use up to a 30% DEET concentration repellent for short-term outdoor activity such as gardening in the back yard. Children between the ages of two to 12 years of age can use a repellent product containing 10% DEET or less, with maximum application of three times per day. Younger children should use the same concentration but only apply it once a day. And unlike sunscreen, insect repellent should be applied sparingly. Very young children should not apply repellent to their faces at all, but an adult can rub repellent on their hands and then carefully apply it to an older child's face. Never put repellent on a young child's hands because of how often they touch their faces.

Insect repellent should never be applied to the mouth and eyes, and very little should be used on the ears. Do not apply over cuts and wounds or near food, and don't inhale the aerosol or spray.

Staying indoors during dawn and dusk, the two times of day when mosquitoes are most active, will help reduce your chances

of getting bit as well. Wear light colored clothing since dark colors and strong fragrances attract mosquitoes. You should also make your yard and home less appealing to mosquitoes and other bugs by draining all standing water from bird baths and wading pools, flower pot saucers, pet dishes, clogged rain gutters, and swings, where they like to lay their eggs.

In the event you do get an insect bite, chances of having an allergic reaction to the venom they inject (especially from fire ants and the bee family) are greater than your developing West Nile Virus (WNV) or some other disease. According to the Mayo Clinic, only 1% - 4% of people bitten by a deer tick get Lyme disease, and less than 1% of those bitten by a mosquito carrying West Nile Virus become severely ill. The Center for Disease Control published a report listing 80% of the people infected with WNV never show symptoms at all.

Texas has seen cases of WNV since 2002, but has had dead birds long before they became associated with the disease. People over age 50 and those with weakened immune systems or chronic health problems are at higher risk to get sick from an infected mosquito, especially if they don't use insect repellent. In Texas, in addition to the previous risk factors, being male doubles your chances of contracting WNV.

Buying fancy electric bug zappers and encouraging bats to live nearby will not stop you from finding the occasional dead bird in your yard. You will not contract WNV from a dead bird but it is not recommended to handle any dead animal with bare hands. The Texas Department of Health said that dead birds don't always mean WNV and that people have active choices on how to protect themselves from these summertime worries.

For more information, contact the National Pesticide Information Center at 1-800-858-7378 or go to <http://npic.orst.edu/> Or try www.MayoClinic.com. Or Texas Department of Health at 1-888-883-9997

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