Skin Cancer and Sunscreen

By Dr. Ramona Warren

It is that time of year when we welcome the warm rays of the sun. With the cool winter and wet spring behind us, we are ready to head outside and enjoy the sunshine. For many of us, reaching for sunscreen before spending time in the sun has become an automatic reaction. We have been taught that using sunscreen is a “must” if we want to prevent skin cancer, but is this really the case?

According to Alternative Articles on Health and Fitness, *“In recent years, we have been bombarded with reports on the dangers of the sun, and the need for sunscreen to protect ourselves from skin cancer. Sales of sunscreen and products containing sunscreen have skyrocketed; yet the incidence of skin cancer in the U.S. has tripled in recent years.”*

So that begs the question: If we are buying and using more sunscreen, why has skin cancer increased?

According to the FDA *“data fails to show that sunscreen use alone helps prevent premature skin aging and skin cancer.”* There is more to decreasing the risk for skin cancer than simply lathering on some lotion. The National Cancer Institute states that your risk of *“skin cancer is related to lifetime exposure to UV radiation.”* So, skin cancer prevention begins in childhood. As in all things, the earlier we begin, the less risk we have for disease.

Sunscreen use also has some other potential health issues. It’s worth noting that many sunscreens contain harmful chemicals. A recent review of sunscreens by the Environmental Working Group states, “Our review…shows that some sunscreen ingredients absorb into the blood, and some have toxic effects. Some release skin-damaging free radicals in sunlight, some act like estrogen and disrupt hormones, and several can cause allergic reactions and skin irritation.”

 What we put on our skin is absorbed directly into our bloodstream, whether it is a lotion or a spray. According to Dr. Lauren Pickert, a biochemist, sunscreen chemicals such as such as Octyl-dimethyl-PABA, Benzophenone-3, Homosalate, Octyl-methoxycinnamate and 4-methyl—benzylidene camphor in sunscreen have been shown to cause free radical damage and can act like estrogens the body, disrupting the hormonal system. Other common chemicals in sunscreens shown to cause cancer are Dioxybenzone, Oxybenzone,Titanium Dioxide, bisphenol-A and PABA. These chemicals are all produced in a lab and are not natural to the body, so they become toxins in the body.

In addition to the toxic effect sunscreen can have on the body, sunscreen has also been shown to block the body’s ability to absorb Vitamin D, which is vital for our overall health. Our main source of Vitamin D is from sun exposure. We need at least 20 minutes of exposure daily. When we use sunscreens and block our body’s ability to get the Vitamin D we need, then our health can suffer in many ways. Vitamin D is very helpful in preventing cancer, as well as improving the function of our immune system. It is also vital for good brain function, strong muscles and bones, and a healthy cardiovascular system.

Does this mean we should never use sunscreen? Not necessarily. However, we should make wise decisions and healthy choices when it comes to the use of sunscreens and sun exposure. Here are some simple steps you can take:

1. Make sure to get at least 20 minutes of sunlight daily WITHOUT SUNSCREEN. Wear a hat and a shirt with sleeves once you have had adequate sun exposure in order to prevent sunburn.
2. Reduce your risk for oxidative damage by eating a healthy diet that includes lots of veggies and Omega 3 fats. Use quality supplements that reduce free radical damage. Often when people burn easily and/or get sun poisoning, they are frequently deficient in calcium and essential fatty acids.
3. Choose a natural sunscreen. Some good brands are Aubrey Organics, Kiss My Face and Badger. You can go to the Environmental Working Group website <http://breakingnews.ewg.org/2012sunscreen/> to see how your sunscreen rates and to find healthier choices.
4. When using a good quality natural sunscreen, make sure to use it liberally and often. Most people do not use enough sunscreen and can be overexposed to UVA/UVB, which can lead to skin cancer.

Remember, the sun is NOT the enemy. We were designed to be in the sun, and many studies show that safe sun exposure without burning can actually decrease your risk for melanoma, the more deadly type of skin cancer. So get out and enjoy the sunshine!