

Getting to know your own skin

Self Care health facts column

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Queensland might describe itself as the sunshine state, but the fact is all Australians enjoy more than their fair share of sunlight. However, for many people, this enjoyment might be comparatively short-lived.

We know that sunlight makes us feel good (consider all those people from the dark and dingy parts of the northern hemisphere desperate to come to a warmer, sunnier climate) and exposing our skin to the sun, at least for a while, does have definite health benefits.

But over exposure really is too much of a good thing.

The Slip, Slop, Slap campaign, initiated some 35 years ago - and which has more recently been modified to Slip, Slop, Slap, Seek and Slide (referring to seeking shade and sliding on sunglasses) - has been recognised internationally as a remarkably effective public health strategy. But, "baby boomers", and certainly Australians born pre-World War II, probably had little or no knowledge of this message in their teenage years when getting sunburnt was considered to be a rite of passage. And a tan was considered to be clear evidence of good health.

So, we are now seeing a generation of older Australians displaying (sometimes rather self-consciously) their dry, wrinkly, sun-damaged skin. Unfortunately, there is also a significant number of young people who still persist with high-risk lifestyle activities - whether that be smoking, drinking to excess or now over exposure to the sun.

Skin cancer is far and away the most common cancer in Australia with melanoma the most deadly. But other skin cancers can also be malignant and cause painful and disfiguring lesions. New therapies are now available to treat pre-cancerous so-called solar keratoses – more commonly known as sunspots. These spots are usually small, scaly or wart-like and appear most commonly on parts of the face such as the nose, the cheeks, upper lip, temples and forehead as well as the back of the hands and forearms.

It's important to get to know your own skin and identify the most serious aspects of sun damage. Check with your doctor or pharmacist if you have doubts about any change in skin appearance. And check out the website www.knowyourownskin.com.au. You can get more information there on how to check your own skin and sign up for a free "Know Your Own Skin" kit.

As well as assessing current skin damage, prevention of future damage is still important (the Know Your Own Skin website also has "sun damage risk calculator"). The use of sunscreens is just one prevention strategy; and it's now well recognised that they are classified according to the level of protection from sunburn they provide. This is promoted on labels by way of the Sun Protection Factor or so-called SPF rating.

Until last year the maximum SPF rating permitted to be advertised in Australia was 30+, but now the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) has authorised the display of an SPF rating of up to 50+.



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For most Australians, definitely all of us who have inherited the northern European or Anglo/Celtic skin type, a 50+ product should be the sunscreen of choice. One of the advantages of the newly labelled sunscreens is that there is greater certainty that they are truly “broad spectrum”. That is they protect against both UVB and UVA wavelengths of sunlight. The old rating was only indicative of protection from the burning UVB rays; however the deeply penetrating UVA rays are equally likely to cause cancer.

You can get more advice on choosing the most appropriate sunscreen and generally how to stay sun smart this summer, from pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society’s Self Care health information. Phone 1300 369 772 for the location of your nearest Self Care pharmacy or log on to the Pharmaceutical Society website at www.psa.org.au and click on “Self Care” then “Find a Self Care Pharmacy”.