

Sun sense is common sense

It took almost half a century for the health risks of cigarette smoking to be widely recognised. Sadly, some young people, especially young women, still take up smoking – probably because of peer pressure and issues related to low self esteem. Older smokers, who remain smokers, almost certainly do so because of nicotine addiction.

It appears that many Australians are also addicted to another form of high-risk behaviour – that is: excess exposure to the sun. There seems to be a lingering perception that a tan is healthy. But, the reality is unless you're born with tanned skin, a tan is evidence of skin damage. So, for all of us who have inherited the Anglo/Celtic skin type, protection from the sun is a really important health strategy.

Of course, we know that some sun exposure is healthy. It promotes the process of vitamin D manufacture within our body, and that's quite apart from our general sense of wellbeing (we don't feel nearly so happy being confined indoors - or even being outside on cloudy days).

With regard to vitamin D, it's almost impossible to obtain enough from food; in fact we get about 90% of our vitamin D from exposure to the sun. However, it's important to strike a balance between sufficient sun exposure for adequate vitamin D production and minimising the risk of skin cancer.

In most parts of Australia – “tank top” (face, hands and arms) exposure for 10 minutes, three or four times a week during the spring and summer months, is ample time. Also, short exposure to sunlight is more efficient at producing vitamin D; so the need for vitamin D is no excuse for getting sunburnt.

Of course the exact amount of sunlight exposure required for adequate vitamin D production is hard to predict. Time of year, time of day, age and skin colour, and whether you live in Port Douglas or Port Arthur will all influence the ideal exposure time.

Remember the adverse effects of sunlight on the skin are cumulative. The damage on and beneath the skin is building up, even without burning. Regular and routine skin protection is essential. The successful “slip, slop, slap” campaign has recently been given added effect with the new Australian/New Zealand standard for sunscreens. The maximum sun protection factor (SPF) rating is now 50+ (previously 30+) and this new standard means testing is applied to water resistance and the broad spectrum feature of sunscreens as well. Your pharmacist can give you more information.

As important as ongoing protection from the burning rays of the sun is to know what our skin normally looks like and to identify any changes – changes that might indicate an underlying serious condition that requires medical attention. Before your skin check, checkout the website www.knowyourownskin.com.au. You'll see why skin checks are so important and actually how to check your skin.

In any event, be proud of your natural skin colour. If you must have a tan, a fake tan is the best option. There are a number of products your pharmacist can recommend which offer a much safer alternative to the sun-induced or solarium-induced variety. But, remember, the colour from a fake tan does not provide protection against UV radiation. And fake tan products that contain a sunscreen only provide protection for a few hours after application – not for the duration of the tan.

You can get more common sense advice and a *Sense in the Sun* fact card on how to stay sun smart 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 check out the Pharmaceutical Society website at www.psa.org.au and click on “Self Care” then “Use the Self Care Pharmacy Finder”.