

What are sunscreens?

Sunscreens are barriers which are applied to the skin. They work by absorbing or reflecting the sun's UV rays away from your skin. Sunscreens come in a wide variety of forms - creams, lotions, sprays, gels and sticks - and there are many brands to choose from.

How do I choose a sunscreen?

Look for a product with a minimum SPF of 30 to protect against the sun's ultraviolet B (UVB), or burning, rays. The product should also contain ingredients that protect against ultraviolet A (UVA) rays which penetrate more deeply into the skin and are responsible for premature aging and contribute to the development of skin cancer. Sunscreens that are labeled "broad-spectrum" help protect against both. Look for the Canadian Dermatology Association (CDA) logo on products to ensure the safety and effectiveness of the sunscreen. Products with the logo have been specially tested.

What is an SPF?

All sunscreens are labelled with a sun protection factor (SPF) number. This relates to the amount of time it takes for your skin to burn without any protection and how long it would take if you used the appropriate amount of sunscreen. An SPF is the ratio between the amount of UV which will cause sunburn in sunscreen protected skin, compared to that in unprotected skin. Sunscreens should not be used to extend the amount of time you would usually spend in the sun.

Are there sunscreens for use during sport?

Yes, some sunscreens are labelled as sport products and are suitable because they have been specially formulated to stay on the skin during sport.

Are there any sunscreens for sensitive skin?

If you have sensitive skin, try a small amount of the product on your arm and check for any reaction up to 48 hours later. People allergic or intolerant to the chemicals in sunscreens should look for products labelled "chemical-free". These usually contain ingredients such as titanium dioxide and zinc oxide that reflect rather than absorb the sun's rays and are much less likely to cause a reaction.

When should I put on sunscreen?

You should apply sunscreen generously and evenly about 20-30 minutes before sun exposure to allow the active ingredients to bond to your skin. To be effective, all sunscreens need to be liberally applied; for example, one palm-full for each arm and one for each leg. Also, remember to reapply regularly, especially after sweating heavily or swimming. Sunscreens should be used with other forms of sun protection, such as shade, hats and clothing, to protect you as much as possible.

Does a product still work after its expiry date?

Sunscreens contain chemicals that eventually break down, compromising the effectiveness of the product, so you should not use a sunscreen after its expiry date. Also, sunscreens are often kept in hot temperatures - in the glove compartment of a car or in a beach bag - conditions which accelerate the deterioration of the product.

How do I protect my lips?

Use a minimum SPF 30 lip balm. There are a variety to choose from. Don't forget to reapply every hour.

When do I need to protect myself from the sun?

You should be protected from 11 am to 4 pm from late spring to early fall and during winter if you are involved in outdoor activities. The sun's rays are strongest around midday, so try to avoid exposure around that time. The sun is harsher the closer you are located to the equator and at higher altitudes where the thinner atmosphere blocks fewer of the sun's rays. The damaging effects of direct exposure to the sun can be increased if there is reflection from snow, water and light coloured sand. Snow reflects up to 80 per cent of the sun's rays - so you could be getting a double dose of radiation when involved in winter sports.