

Protect your skin and eyes in the sun



Skin cancer is one of the most common cancers in the UK, and too much sun can increase your risk. Exposure to sunlight can also affect your eyes. Here's how to protect your skin and reduce the risks to your eyes.

In 2010, around 100,000 people were diagnosed with skin cancer in the UK. More than 12,000 of these cancers were malignant melanoma, the most serious type of skin cancer. Each year, around 2,200 people die from skin cancer.

Skin cancers are caused by damage from the sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays. Protecting the skin from the sun can help prevent these cancers.

How does the sun damage skin?

UV rays penetrate deep into the skin and damage cells. These cells are then at risk of becoming cancerous. You can't feel UV damaging your skin and it happens even when the sun doesn't feel hot.

Getting sunburnt causes the top layers of skin to release chemicals that make blood vessels swell and leak fluids. Skin turns red and feels hot and painful, and severe sunburn can lead to swelling and blisters.

"Sunburn is dangerous at any age, but it's especially harmful in children and young people," says Katy Scammell of Cancer Research UK's SunSmart campaign. "Sunburn in childhood can greatly increase your risk of developing skin cancer later in life."

After you've been sunburnt, the skin peels to get rid of damaged cells. Eventually, it will heal and look healthy, but permanent damage may have been done. Some experts believe that just one episode of blistering sunburn before the age of 20 can double your chance of getting malignant melanoma.

Who's at risk?

Skin cancer can affect anyone, but people most at risk have:

- **fair skin that burns in strong sun**
- **red or fair hair**
- **a lot of moles or freckles**
- **a personal or family history of skin cancer**
- **already had sunburn, especially when young**

People with naturally brown or black skin are less likely to get skin cancer as darker skin has some protection against UV rays. However, skin cancer can still occur.

Be safe in the sun

Sun damage doesn't just happen when you're on holiday in the sun. It can happen when you're not expecting it, for example when you go for a walk or sit in your garden.

"Sun protection is something you need to be aware of every day in the summer," says Scammel. "Whether on holiday or at home, you can protect yourself by following the SunSmart messages."

- **Spend time in the shade between 11am and 3pm.**
- **Make sure you never burn.**
- **Aim to cover up with a T-shirt, hat and sunglasses.**
- **Remember to take extra care with children.**
- **Then use factor 15+ sunscreen.**

Report mole changes or unusual skin growths to your GP.

Always take special care of children's skin. The best way to do this is to cover them up and keep them in the shade.

Sunbeds are not safe

Sunbeds are not a safe alternative to lying outside in the sun. Skin will still be exposed to harmful UV rays. Health risks linked to sunbeds and other UV tanning equipment include:

- **skin cancer**
- **premature ageing of skin**
- **sunburnt skin**
- **dryness and itching**
- **bumpy rashes**
- **eye irritation**
- **cataracts**

"Using sunbeds before the age of 35 increases your risk of skin cancer by up to 75%," says Scammell. "Sunbeds also accelerate the skin's natural ageing process."

It is now illegal for people under 18 years old to use sunbeds, including in tanning salons, beauty salons, leisure centres, gyms and hotels. Find out more in [Are sunbeds safe?](#)

Do not use sunbeds or other UV tanning equipment if:

- **you have been sunburnt in the past, particularly in childhood**
- **you have fair skin that burns easily**
- **you have a large number of freckles or red hair**
- **you have a large number of moles**
- **you're taking medication that makes your skin more sensitive to sunlight**
- **anyone in your family has had skin cancer in the past**

Protecting your eyes

Long-term exposure to sunlight increases the risk of a type of cataract and is also linked to pterygia (growths on the surface of the eye).

Simon Kelly, of the Royal College of Ophthalmologists, warns that sun can burn the eyes too.

"Over-exposure to ultraviolet light, such as a day at the beach without proper eye protection, can cause a temporary but painful burn to the surface of the eye, similar to sunburn on the skin," he says.

He adds that reflected sunlight from snow and water, and artificial light from sunbeds, is particularly dangerous. Always avoid looking directly at the sun. "Staring directly at the sun can permanently scar the retina, the area at the back of the eye responsible for vision," he says.

Another risk to eyes is skin cancer, which can affect the eyelids and area around the eyes. Long-term exposure to the sun can increase this risk.

Wearing a wide-brimmed hat can reduce the amount of UV rays that reach your face and eyes.

What to look for in sunglasses

Sunglasses can also offer protection, but not all of them are adequate. When you're shopping for sunglasses, choose a pair that has one of the following:

- **the CE Mark and British Standard (BS EN 1836:2005)**
- **a UV 400 label**
- **a statement that the sunglasses offer 100% UV protection**

Think about the sides of your eyes, and consider sunglasses with wide or wraparound arms.

Source: NHS Choices