



“Safe in the Sun”

by
Marta Rogido, MD.

Originally published in the Good Beginnings newsletter, “Beginnings Buzz-z-z-z-z”
Vol. III, No. 2 – June, 2000

Summer is almost here! In Southern California we have many warm and sunny days all year round, and there are few more pleasurable things in life than the feeling of the sun on our skin. All the fun outdoor activities involve sun exposure and our children are the ones that take the most sun. Under normal circumstances children receive three times the annual sun exposure of adults and most of one's lifetime sun exposure occurs in childhood. The sun provides vital energy to all beings on earth, but it can also harm us. Its ultraviolet (UV) rays can cause sunburn and skin cancer.

There is compelling evidence that childhood is a particularly vulnerable time for the carcinogenic effect (cancer inducing effect) of sun exposure on the skin. Studies indicate that excessive sun exposure during the first 10-20 years of life greatly increases the risk of skin cancer. Remember: a suntan is not good for your child, it is a sign of skin damage.

Skin cancer is the fastest growing type of cancer: one child in every hundred is currently at risk of developing melanoma, the most malignant form of skin cancer. There will be a million new cases of skin cancer this year in the United States and some of these cancers are deadly. It is estimated that 90 % of non-melanoma skin cancer and much of melanoma incidence can be attributed to sun exposure. Non-melanoma skin cancer (basal cell and squamous cell carcinoma) has been associated with cumulative sun exposure whereas melanoma has been associated with short, intense sun exposure or two or more blistering sunburns early in life. Our skin remembers each suntan and each sunburn, year after year. Depletion of the earth's protective ozone layer adds to the problem of damage caused by light exposure.

Protecting ourselves from the sun's rays could prevent 80 % of skin cancer. Those with fair skin are at highest risk but we all are at risk for skin cancer, regardless of the color of our skin and everyone needs protection from the sun. It is clear that sun protection is most vital in the early years. Sun protection includes avoiding sun exposure, using adequate clothing and using sunscreen.

Sunscreen is not recommended for infants less than 6 months old. It may be used on small areas of the body such as the face and the back of the hands if adequate clothing and shade are not available. For older children, choose a water-resistant or waterproof sunscreen with the words "broad-spectrum" on the label - it means that the sunscreen will screen out both ultraviolet B (UVB) and A (UVA) rays. The sun protection factor (SPF) should be at least 15. Sunscreens that are "waterproof" should be reapplied every 2 hours, especially if your baby is playing in the water. Zinc oxide, a very effective sunblock, can be used as extra protection on the nose, cheeks, tops of the ears, and on the shoulders.

Test the sunscreen for a reaction before applying it all over. Apply carefully around the eyes, avoiding the eyelids. If your baby rubs sunscreen into his or her eyes, wipe the eyes and hands clean with a damp cloth. If the sunscreen burns her eyes try a different brand or try a sunscreen stick or sunblock with titanium or zinc oxide. If a rash develops, talk to your pediatrician.

Use enough sunscreen and rub it in well, making sure to cover all exposed areas, especially your baby's face, nose, ears, feet and hands, and even the back of the knees. Put it on 30 minutes before going outdoors. The sunscreen needs time to work on the skin. Remember, sunscreens should be used for sun protection and not as a reason to stay in the sun longer.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends these simple rules to protect your child from sunburn now and from skin cancer later in life:

- Babies under 6 months of age should be kept out of the direct sunlight. Sunscreen is not recommended for infants < 6 months old. Keep infants in the shade and covered up with clothing.
- Dress your child in clothing that covers the body, such as lightweight long pants, long-sleeved shirts and brimmed hats that shade the face and cover the ears. Select clothes that are tightly woven. Hold the clothing up to a lamp or window and see how much light shines through. The less light, the better. Clothing made of cotton is both cool and protective.
- Protect your child's eyes with sunglasses that have UV protection.
- Try to keep your child out of the sun between 10:00 am and 4 pm, when the sun's rays are the strongest.
- Be particularly careful in areas of sand, snow, water and concrete since those surfaces reflect the sun's damaging UV rays.
- Use protection even on cloudy days, since most of the sun's rays can come through the clouds.

Your baby needs you for protection from the sun and sunburns. Sunburns can be dangerous. If your baby gets sunburn and is under 1 year old contact your pediatrician at once - severe sunburn is an emergency. For babies over the age of one, call your pediatrician if there is blistering, pain or fever.

Marta Rogido, M.D., is a staff neonatologist at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center.