

THE LOWDOWN:

Everything you never knew about... sun protection

It's not as simple as you think (and not as boring either!). Ensure a healthy glow with **Josephine Stockman's** need-to-read tan truths

SUN LOTIONS HAVE SELL-BY DATES

Before you dig out those bottles lingering in the back of your bathroom cabinet, remind yourself when you bought them. Most sunscreens have a shelf life of one to two years maximum – and this only holds true if you've followed the manufacturer's instructions and stored them in a cool dark place. Leaving bottles cooking in the sun by the pool can diminish their protective powers – so make sure you buy a fresh batch for your next trip.

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE INDEX

Don't just check the temperature forecast – look up the sun index (see www.metoffice.gov.uk/weather/uk/uk_forecast_uv.html), which takes into account the position of the sun in the sky and the amount of cloud cover – both of which affect the strength of UV radiation. The higher the number, the more risk there is of burning. The sun is strongest between 11am and 3pm, so take extra care during this time. A simple rule is to look at your shadow: if it's shorter than you, seek shade as this means the sun's rays are at their most powerful.

RAY CAN REACH YOU EVEN IN THE SHADE

Safe in the shadows? Nope – up to a third of UV rays will still reach you. So to stay protected, cover up properly: look for materials with a close weave (hold the fabric up to the light and you can see how much gets through) as they will block more UV rays. Snorkelling or swimming in a T-shirt is a good way to avoid burning, but be aware that clothes stretch when they get wet, allowing more rays to penetrate, so apply sunblock underneath, too.

SUN CAN HARM YOUR EYES, TOO

UV rays can damage eyes as well as skin: overexposure can even lead to cataracts and eye cancer – so make sure you protect your peepers. This is particularly important at the beach or when skiing, as sand, sea and snow all reflect and intensify sunlight. Those knock-off designer shades won't cut it – you need to make sure you buy a pair with a CE Mark and British Standard BSEN 1836:1997,

or a UV400 label – this guarantees they offer a safe level of ultraviolet protection.

KIDS HAVE THINNER SKIN

Children's skin is only one third as thick as adults', and therefore more at risk of sunburn. An easy way of ensuring they are protected all day is to kit them out in special sun-safe, lightweight swimwear that covers legs, arms and body (try www.lioninthesun.com or www.equatorsun.com). You might also consider a sun tent for when there's no shade available (www.sun-togs.co.uk has UV-resistant tents from £20). Fair and red-headed children and those with pale skin are especially at risk, so should be particularly careful. Kids' eyes are three times more sensitive than adults', too – so make sure they have UV-safe sunglasses.

SOME MEDICINES CAN MAKE YOU BURN

On antibiotics? Be aware that some can cause photosensitivity, which means you'll burn much faster in the sun. Ones to watch out for include Tetracycline (often prescribed for bacterial infections), Ofloxacin (used to treat eye infections) and Minocycline (used to treat rheumatic conditions). The same goes for certain antidepressants and some types of malaria pills (such as Doxycycline). Check with your doctor, and take extra care in the sun if you are taking any of these.

THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A HEALTHY TAN

Golden limbs may look lovely, but even a hint of a tan is a surefire sign of skin damage. Instead of baking in the sun, consider faking a holiday glow. The latest self-tanning lotions deliver a convincingly bronzed appearance with no unpleasant pong afterwards. Try Xen-Tan (www.xen-tan.co.uk; from £24), which lasts for an impressive 10 days.

MONITORING MOLES MAY SAVE YOUR LIFE

Dodgy-looking moles can be one of the first signs of skin cancer, so it's crucial to keep an eye on them. First, get to know your body's moles and what they usually look like – then check them regularly for any changes, using

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the ABCD rule: Asymmetry, where the shape of one side of the mole doesn't match the other; Border, if the edges are ragged or irregular; Colour, if this has changed at all, particularly to a darker shade of brown or black; and Diameter, if it has grown in size. If you notice any of these changes, contact your GP. The Mole Clinic (020 7734 1177, www.themoleclinic.co.uk) offers full-body skin checks from £115 at its London branch, as well as walk-in clinics in Superdrug stores nationwide.

SOME SUN IS GOOD FOR YOU

The good news is that some sunshine is essential for the body – stimulating vitamin D production, which is important for teeth, bones and a healthy immune system. It's also known to be beneficial for conditions such as acne, SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder), psoriasis and even depression.

Cancer Research UK runs SunSmart, the UK's national skin cancer prevention campaign. For more information and tips on how to stay safe in the sun, visit www.sunsmart.org.uk. ■

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