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Be Safe in the Sun This Summer

School is out, summer is here and most people have summer plans in mind that include spending a lot of time in the sun. Natural sunlight contains vitamin D that our bodies can absorb in just 15 minutes outside on a sunny day. However, while some sunlight is good, it is important to play it safe in the sun to prevent any harmful effects. For this reason, the Central Connecticut Health District is urging all residents to be protected while having fun in the sun this summer.

According to the Connecticut Department of Public Health (DPH), skin cancer is the most common form of cancer in the United States and the most common cancer among 20 to 30 year-olds. It's estimated that one American dies every hour from melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer. In Connecticut, there were 930 cases of malignant melanoma diagnosed in 2009, and 100 deaths from the disease.

It is important to wear protective clothing, such as a shirt, hat, pants and sunglasses when in the sun for more than 15 minutes and seek shade whenever possible. Be sure to apply a generous coat of sunscreen 15 minutes before going out and reapply every two hours or more often if getting wet or sweating heavily.

Too much sun can cause skin cancer due to the ultraviolet radiation from the sun's rays, known as UV-A and UV-B. UV-B rays stop at the skin's surface and cause a tan but can just as easily burn skin if a person is out in the sun for too long. UV-A rays can penetrate the skin and damage the elasticity of the skin, which leads to wrinkles and premature aging. Both types of rays can contribute to cancer by harming the skin's DNA and they both are an added risk factor to skin cancer.

Sunscreen is effective in protecting from skin cancer because of mineral blockers and chemical absorbers. According to the DPH, mineral blockers form a temporary shield to block the rays from damaging the skin. The main blockers that are used in sunscreen are zinc oxide and titanium oxide, which are both good at preventing sunburn from UV-B rays.

When choosing a sunscreen, it is important to pick one that will protect you. When looking at the label, one would want a lotion that offers a broad spectrum of protection, both UV-A and UV-B protection with an SPF 15 or greater. Sunscreen should contain zinc oxide as the active ingredient or as a blend with titanium dioxide, because these are the mineral blockers that are needed. Also, a sunscreen should be water resistant. Zinc oxide is important because it can block the UV-A rays and has the broadest spectrum of protection, although it is only one ingredient.

There have been many questions as to whether or not wearing sunscreen all day poses a health hazard to the individual. According to the DPH, sunscreen has the potential to release ingredients across the skin and into the body. Questions have been raised about certain chemical absorbers such as oxybenzone because it has endocrine disrupting activity. While the activity is weak, the sunscreen is meant to be worn all day, so it is recommended that individuals use sunscreen that is zinc oxide based. Vitamin A is an ingredient that should be avoided, especially by pregnant women, because it is absorbed in the skin and can pose a risk to the pregnancy.

When it comes to applying sunscreen to infants, babies under the age of six months should be sheltered from the sun by hats, shade and clothing. If there is sun exposure, only small amounts of sunscreen should be used very sparingly on skin. If a child is over six months of age, it is recommended that sunscreen be used normally, avoiding the area around the eyes as toddlers tend to rub their eyes and may cause irritation from the sunscreen. When using spray sunscreen, it is important not to spray it near a child's face, as the chemicals from the sunscreen can be inhaled. It is

better to spray sunscreen into your hand then apply to exposed skin.

Individuals with lighter-toned skin are more susceptible to UV damage, although people of all races and ethnicities can be at risk for skin cancer. Those who have a family history of skin cancer, plenty of moles or freckles, or a history of severe sunburns early in life are at a higher risk of skin cancer. To minimize the harmful effects of excessive and unprotected sun exposure, protection from intense UV radiation should be a life-long practice for everyone.

For individuals who are required to work outdoors during the summer, it is extremely important to stay hydrated throughout the day. Every year in the US, hundreds of people are killed by heat-related conditions. Individuals who are too young, too old or those who have underlying health conditions or are taking certain medications are at the highest risk of heat stress and heat stroke. Outdoor workers should drink non-caffeinated liquids frequently, about 8 ounces of fluid every 20-30 minutes. Breaks should be taken frequently in cooler, shaded areas and working environments should have cooling fans working at all times.

Fortunately, skin cancer can be prevented and is highly curable if found early. The best way to detect skin cancer early is to examine your skin regularly and recognize changes in moles and skin growths.

For more information about sun safety, visit the Connecticut Department of Public Health website at www.ct.gov/dph or for more information, visit the National Council on Skin Cancer Prevention website at www.skincancerprevention.org or call (301) 801-4422. Further information about this or any other public health issues may be directed to the Central Connecticut Health District at (860) 721-2822.