

Sun Protection for Burn Patients

Just say no to ultraviolet rays! Now that your burns and grafts have healed, it is time to learn about taking care of this new, sensitive skin. Your new skin can be easily damaged by the sun's rays, so give it a little tender loving care.

Sunlight

Sunlight contains ultraviolet radiation or UV rays. These rays are in two groups: ultraviolet A (UVA) and ultraviolet B (UVB). UVA rays do not cause painful damage, but can be sneaky. Over time, they can damage our DNA and cause premature aging. The UVB rays are those that cause damage to skin. Damage not only means a painful sunburn but also skin cancer, cosmetic problems, and cataracts. Sunburns can occur from direct sunlight, on cloudy days, from water or snow glare, or even in what appears to be a shaded area.

Your New Skin

The skin's natural defenses against sun rays are not enough. Skin that has been burned and/or grafted will damage more easily. This is also true of any donor sites, as they have "grown" new skin. This new skin is more likely to be affected by UV light for the rest of your life, or until the skin has "matured." This process can take one to two years.

It's best not to expose burn-injured skin to any sunlight until all the red color has faded. Wounds may turn very dark brown or blotchy even after only brief exposure to the sun. Unprotected skin can get a slight sunburn in as little as 12 minutes on a summer day.

UV light can cause permanent color changes. This means that grafted or old burned areas will be "tanned" long after the rest of a body's tan has faded. It can also cause increased scarring. This can affect one's look as well as the way the body functions. You may not be able to see the scarring right away, even though it will occur.

A Little TLC

Clothes protect against UV rays. When using clothes for sun shielding, it is best to wear a wide-brimmed hat to shield the face, long-sleeved shirts to protect the arms and chest, long pants to cover burns or grafts on the legs, and leather or cotton gloves to protect the hands. Pressure garments or loosely-meshed garments (football shirts) **do not** provide a good barrier to rays. Regular clothing over the pressure garment works best. Sunscreen under the pressure garment can add short term burn prevention.

Sunscreens give your skin the tender loving care it deserves. Make **sun shielding** or sunscreen a part of your daily routine. Sunscreens are products that absorb sun rays and protect against scarring and pigment color changes. The best way to choose a sunscreen is to check the SPF, or Sun Protection Factor number. Use one with an **SPF number of 30 or more**. The number means the sunscreen will protect your skin 30 times longer in the sun than skin with no sunscreen applied. Use **opaque creams** rather than clear gel sunscreens for better sun protection. Look for sunscreen with **parsol**. Avoid using an alcohol-based sunscreen as they may dry or irritate the skin.

Use **children's PABA free sunscreens** for infants and children less than six years of age. There are a small number of people who develop a rash from PABA. PABA-free sunscreens that contain benzophenones also work well in blocking UVA and UVB rays. Sports sunscreens work well on faces and hands of people of all ages. For dry skin, use an oil-based sunscreen. For skin that tends to breakout, use a water-based product. All of these products come in children's and adults' forms. For best results, a sunscreen must be applied 30 – 60 minutes before going out into the sun.

Apply a lot of sunscreen. Choose a sunscreen that is waterproof if you perspire a lot or will be swimming. Apply sunscreens as often as the label advises – often this would be every 90 minutes.

Medicines can make skin more likely to sunburn. Some antibiotics, water pills, and birth control pills make the skin more sensitive to UV light. Check with your doctor or pharmacist if you are taking any medicine. Do not use tanning creams over grafted or donor areas until the skin has matured, 12 – 18 months post-graft.

You can say “no” to UV rays and still say “yes” to fun in the sun!

If you are a patient receiving care at UnityPoint – Meriter, Swedish American or a health system outside of UW Health, please use the phone numbers provided in your discharge instructions for any questions or concerns.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 7/2019 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#4295