

Daily Union Article

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Title: Cloudy Days Can Produce Sunburns

Don't let the overcast skies make you think you are safe from catching too many sun rays! Even cloudy days can produce a sunburn if you are outside. The term associated with this phenomenon is called *cloud enhancement* UV radiation. Granted, the clouds reduce the amount of ultraviolet light your skin is exposed to, but the clouds still allow some exposure to harmful UV rays – as much as 80% of UV rays pass through clouds. Ultraviolet A (UVA) and ultraviolet B (UVB) are the two types of solar radiation that most commonly cause sunburns.

Whether it's cloudy or a full sun day, you need sun protection from sun up to sun down. Our body can protect itself by increasing the melanin production on the surface of the skin. The extra melanin (the dark pigment on the outer layer of our skin) creates the darker color we know as a "sun tan."

However, this protection can go only so far before the sun begins to damage your skin. The amount of melanin people can produce is determined genetically. Many people don't have enough melanin to protect the skin well enough to prevent damage from sunburns. Over time, exposure to damaging UV rays – from the sun or a tanning bed – can lead to skin cancer. Since the damage from this exposure builds over time, it is important to start with sun protection at a young age.

The Mayo Clinic identifies several health risk factors for us to be aware of:

- Having fair skin
- Living or vacationing somewhere sunny, warm or at high altitude
- Working outdoors
- Mixing outdoor recreation with drinking alcohol
- Having a history of sunburn
- Regularly exposing unprotected skin to UV light from sunlight OR artificial sources such as a tanning bed
- Taking a drug that makes you more likely to burn (such as some antihistamines, oral contraceptives, or antiarthritics, to name a few.)

When your skin becomes burned from being exposed to the sun, you not only get sunburned, but you also increase the risk of other skin damage and certain diseases.

Infection: You know you have a sunburn when your skin becomes red and you can feel mild to extreme pain from the surface of your body. When your skin burns to the point of blistering, any blisters that rupture become a prime place for bacterial infection to enter your body. If you experience pain, redness, swelling and oozing blisters, you should consult with your doctor for treatment options.

Premature Aging: Repeated exposure to the sun as well as repeated sunburns speeds up the skin's aging process. The skin changes that occur by UV light are called photoaging which has several negative effects:

- Weakened connective tissues which will reduce the skin's strength and elasticity
- Deep wrinkles
- Dry, rough skin
- Fine red veins on your cheeks, nose, and ears
- Freckles, mostly on the face and shoulders
- Dark or discolored spots, called macules, on your face, back of hands, arms, chest, and upper back.

Precancerous Lesions: These will appear as rough, scaly patches in areas that have been damaged by the sun. They may be white, pink, tan, or brown in color. These patches can evolve into skin cancer and should be monitored by your physician.

Skin Cancer: Even if you don't often sunburn, excessive sun exposure can increase your risk of skin cancer. This type of cancer develops mainly in the areas of the body most exposed to sunlight – the scalp, face, lips, ears, neck, chest, arms, hands, and legs.

Eye Damage: Not only can the sun burn your skin, it can also burn your eyes. Too much UV light damages the retina, lens or cornea. When sun damage occurs to the lens, it can lead to cataracts (clouding of the lens.)

Awareness and prevention are key in avoiding any of these sun exposure challenges. The younger you are when you begin protecting yourself (or your children) from sun exposure, the greater the reduction in experiencing an adverse risk as you get older. Here are some things to consider in the realm of prevention:

When you make plans that will require you to be outside during the day, make sure you prepare yourself and your family for sun protection. Think about where you will be able to find shade – especially during the midday hours – when the sun can do its greatest damage. If there are no shade trees to stand under, take an umbrella or find some other form of shelter that will cover any of your exposed skin.

Be aware that shiny surfaces can reflect the sun's rays and intensify the UV rays. Sunny beaches, sand, water, and even snow can cause very serious painful sunburns.

Wear sun protection gear like light colored, long-sleeve shirts or wide brimmed hats and sunglasses to protect your arms, face, and eyes.

The Centers for Disease Control recommend wrap-around sunglasses that block both UVA and UVB rays. They offer the best protection by blocking UV rays from all directions.

Apply a thick layer of broad-spectrum sunscreen with the highest possible rating of protection. Lotions are rated by SPF level – sun protection factor. You need to have a minimum SPF of 15, but higher numbers indicate more protection. Reapply these lotions at least every two (2) hours since they wear off easily. They also have expiration dates, so make sure you check the expiration date.

I know it's only April, but the sun still comes up every day and that means we need to be diligent in protection our skin and eyes from the damage of UV rays. For more information about safe outdoor practices, contact me at the Geary County K-State Research and Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!