Hello, Alice!

As the summer is soon to arrive, I was wondering what type of clothing should I wear to protect myself from the sun? Also, what color works best, light or black? I seem to be getting conflicting answers on the Internet. I am a fair skinned male. Thanks for your help!

Answer

Dear Reader,

Your proactive approach towards sun protection is sunsational! As you mentioned, summer is a time when people are especially at risk for skin damage due to stronger ultraviolet (UV) rays and the temptation to beat the heat by wearing less clothing. To provide a quick answer, clothing that covers more skin, is dry, made from a thicker fabric, and is tightly knit is especially helpful in protecting yourself from the sun’s UV rays. In terms of color, research has shown that darker colors, such as black, tend to provide more protection from rays than lighter colors. Read on to learn more about other factors to think about when trying to find the most effective protection from the sun.

The sun’s UV rays are strongest in the middle of the day, which is why the American Cancer Society recommends staying in the shade or indoors between ten a.m. and four p.m., if possible. If that’s not possible, it’s good to think about ways to block, filter, or absorb those harmful UV rays, and depending on the type, some clothes may be able to prevent UV exposure. A fabric’s ability to filter UV rays is measured by a unit called ultraviolet protection factor (UPF). Tighter knits, thicker fabrics (such as polyester and synthetic yarns), and darker colors all reduce the skin’s exposure to UV rays, as do longer sleeves and pants. If clothing items have a UPF rating of 15 or higher — meaning one fifteenth or less of the UV rays penetrate the clothes and reach the skin — it can be labeled and marketed as sun-protective. Sunglasses (with labels that specify UV protection), hats (preferably with brims that are two to three inches wide), and some fabrics can also block out UV rays, which is why covering up is an effective protection strategy.

Those who feel more comfortable with less coverage might consider slathering on the sunscreen. Sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15 is an effective way to filter out UV rays, but it doesn’t block the rays completely. In fact, no matter how high the SPF, no sunscreen
protects you completely from UV rays. To provide more context, sunscreens with SPF 15 filter out about 93 percent of UV rays, while sunscreens with SPF 50 filter out about 98 percent of UV rays. It’s good to note that these percentages are based on the assumption that the sunscreen is applied regularly and hasn't expired.

If you’re wondering how to choose a shirt, sunscreen, or hat for the most sun protection, organizations such as the Skin Cancer Foundation award a Seal of Recommendation to manufacturers that meet certain sun protection standards, which may be a helpful starting point. This process involves manufacturers providing volunteer photobiologists (experts in UV radiation) scientific data that demonstrates their product(s) can help prevent sun-induced damage to the skin. This Seal of Recommendation can be found on products ranging from sunscreen to clothing to types of window glass.

Wearing clothes, hats, sunglasses, and sunscreen that block as many UV rays as possible are a crucial part of a summer sun protection strategy. To help keep track of the best ways to protect skin from the sun, the American Cancer Society has updated an Australian campaign to remind everyone to “Slip! Slop! Slap!®And Wrap,” referring to:

- ‘Slip’ on a shirt
- ‘Slop’ on sunscreen
- ‘Slap’ on a hat
- ‘Wrap’ on sunglasses

One common concern about blocking, filtering, or absorbing too much sunlight is that the body won’t be able to produce vitamin D. The good news is that getting a little extra vitamin D-rich food in your diet may help compensate for the lack of sun exposure. So, with adequate coverage and protection, having some outside time doesn’t have to harm your skin or limit your fun in the sun. One last point, Reader, is that although you have reason to be concerned about your fair skin and susceptibility to sun damage, people with all shades of skin benefit from protecting their skin against the sun’s UV rays. If you ever have concerns about potential sun damage, consider making an appointment with a dermatologist or your health care provider.

Here's to donning some stylish threads while enjoying the summer sun!

Alice!

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