

# Get Sun Smart

Long days outside in the sun are just part of the job for farmers and ranchers, but you can take steps to help minimize the sun's burning rays — and your risk of skin cancer.

by *Kindra Gordon*

**W**e've all been told that too much time in the sun is bad for our skin. But how often do we take the time to protect ourselves from the sun, and what are the best methods for sun protection? Here's a quick refresher on how to be smart in the sun.

## Know the facts

First, it's important to understand how damaging the sun's rays can be to our health. Too much sun exposure causes wrinkles, freckles and skin texture changes, and it can also cause more serious health issues like cataracts and skin cancer — the most common form of cancer in the United States. More than 1 million people are diagnosed with skin cancer annually.

Additional statistics provided by the Skin Cancer Foundation are startling:

- ▶ More than 90% of all skin cancers are caused by sun exposure.
- ▶ One in five Americans and one in three Caucasians will develop skin cancer in the course of a lifetime.
- ▶ A person's risk for skin cancer doubles if he or she has had five or more sunburns. And, one blistering sunburn in childhood more than doubles a person's chances of developing melanoma skin cancer later in life.
- ▶ Skin cancer is the No. 1 cancer in men over age 50, ahead of prostate, lung and colon cancer.

Chuck Schwab, Extension safety specialist with Iowa State University, says sunburn prevention is especially important for farmers and ranchers because of their long-term exposure to the sun. "Farmers and

ranchers spend more time outdoors in direct exposure to the sun, making them at higher risk for skin cancer," he says.

Likewise, Dee Jepsen, an assistant professor and state safety leader with The Ohio State University Department of Food, Agricultural and Biological Engineering says, "Farmers and ranchers are at higher risk [of skin cancer] because of the nature of their job. Skin cancer is, and should be respected, as an occupational illness."

Jepsen explains that skin is the largest organ of the body, and it works just as hard as any internal organ.

"It weighs about 6 pounds (lb.); protects us against heat, light, injury and infection; and regulates body temperature," she explains. "We need to protect our skin just as we do our heart, lungs and liver from injury or disease."

But skin cancer isn't the only reason we need to protect ourselves from the sun. Jepsen says chronic exposure to ultraviolet (UV) light can cause other health-related issues. For example, sunburns can cause acute injuries to the skin.

"Besides the uncomfortable burning sensation, overexposure to UV rays contributes to exhaustion, lowers your response rate and diminishes your immunization factors," Jepsen says.

As an analogy, Jepsen poses this example: "A grape is a nice, smooth and scrumptious fruit filled with zest and juice. A raisin is the same product, just aged by the sun. Which would you rather be?"

## Sunscreen and more

Jepsen and Schwab say the good

news is that skin damage from the sun is largely preventable — if you take the right precautions.

Obviously, sunscreen is the first line of defense against the sun's harmful rays. A sunscreen with an SPF (sun protection factor) of 15 or higher is recommended. Sunscreen should even be used on cloudy and hazy days — and during the winter — because the sun's rays can penetrate cloud cover.

However, Jepsen recognizes most farm and ranch workers — particularly men — don't like to wear sunscreen because of several reasons: 1) it attracts dirt and insects; 2) it is generally sticky; and 3) it is easily wiped off with perspiration. Thus, farm families need to look for additional forms of sun protection against UV light. Jepsen and Schwab suggest the following:

1) Wear protective clothing, like long-sleeved, light-weight shirts.

2) Wear a sun-safe hat — something with a 3-inch (in.) brim all the way around. "Standard baseball caps do not provide sun protection to the back of the neck and ears. These are critical parts of our skin that receive high sun exposure when working outside — and are where most skin cancers appear," Schwab explains. Cowboy hats, straw hats, fishing or bucket-style caps, and Australian booney hats all offer better sun protection than a baseball cap.

3) Protect your eyes from cataracts and corneal burns by wearing sunglasses with 100% UV protection. Schwab says not all sunglasses offer this level of protection (or any protection), so find out what kind of protection your sunglasses provide.

4) If possible, avoid working in the direct sun between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. This is when the sun's rays are strongest.

"This may require rethinking and rescheduling when certain tasks are done to avoid the intense sun exposure," Schwab recommends. Jepsen adds that working in a cab-enclosed tractor or under a sun canopy during these times may be an alternative.

5) Lastly, Jepsen advises paying attention to the medications you take that may make

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## Learn the ABC's of skin cancer

Early detection and treatment is the best defense against skin cancer. Pay attention to moles on your skin for these signs, which may indicate skin cancer:

**Asymmetry** — one-half of the area does not match the other half.

**Border** — the edges are uneven or ragged.

**Color** — the color is uneven with more than one shade present.

**Diameter** — any change in size, or if the size is larger than a pencil eraser.

**Sensation** — changes in the way it feels (itching, dry, scaly, lumpy, swollen or tender).

your skin more sensitive to UV light. When taking such medications during the hot summer months it becomes even more critical to wear sunscreen and/or long sleeves

and a hat to prevent burning.

In conclusion, Iowa State's Schwab reiterates the importance of taking the extra time and precautions to protect yourself

from the sun. He also encourages individuals to regularly be checked by a doctor for signs of skin cancer. If detected early, most skin cancer is treatable.



## Understanding sunscreen

Sunscreen absorbs, reflects or scatters ultraviolet (UV) light — invisible rays from the sun that can cause sunburn and other skin damage. UV light is divided into three wavelength bands: ultraviolet A (UVA), ultraviolet B (UVB) and ultraviolet C (UVC). Only UVA and UVB rays reach the earth, and that is what you want your sunscreen to protect you from.

At minimum you should use a broad-spectrum sunscreen with an SPF of at least 15. The SPF number is a measurement of the amount of UVB protection — the higher the number, the greater the protection. (SPF is not an indication of how much time you can spend in the sun.) An SPF 15 filters out about 93% of the UVB rays; SPF 30 filters about 97% of UVB rays.

However, SPF doesn't tell you whether the sunscreen also blocks the sun's UVA rays — the ones that go deeper into the skin and cause premature aging.

To see if you're getting UVA protection, look for titanium dioxide, zinc oxide, oxybenzone or avobenzone, also called Parsol 1789, in the ingredient label.

By late 2009, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) intends to have sunscreen manufacturers include a four-star UVA rating on their product labels to help consumers understand the level of protection provided. One star means the product offers low UVA protection. Four stars mean the sunscreen offers the highest UVA protection. With

these new rules, if a product doesn't offer any UVA protection or isn't tested for UVA protection, it must say "No UVA protection." The SPF rating for UVB protection will remain the same.



## Additional sunscreen tips

Look for sunscreens that are water-resistant, which offers some protection against washing off in water or when perspiring heavily. Sunscreens can no longer be labeled "waterproof" because all sunscreens wash off to some extent.

Most people use sunscreen too sparingly. A liberal application is 1 ounce (oz.) — the amount in a shot glass — to cover all exposed parts of the body. Be sure to rub the sunscreen in well.

To maximize protection, apply sunscreen liberally 30 minutes before going outdoors and reapply every two hours. Experts say that just like any other medication, sunscreen needs time to be absorbed and to be effective.

Sunscreens are designed to remain stable and at original strength for up to three years. This means you can use leftover sunscreen from one summer to the next. However, if you use sunscreen frequently and liberally, a bottle of sunscreen shouldn't last you that long. Discard sunscreen that is past the expiration date or is more than 3 years old.