

Skin Protection from Sun Damage Is Vital

By Susan Camp

We are having an exceptionally hot summer, and if weather predictions hold true, we can expect many more of the same. For gardeners, the excessive heat means not only that we have to water our plants more often, but that we have to take extra care to prevent skin damage from long hours spent working in sunlight.

Overexposure to sun is an occupational hazard for anyone who spends time outdoors. As a person ages, the skin loses its ability to repair areas damaged by repeated exposure to the sun's two types of ultraviolet rays. UVA rays cause premature aging of the skin, even through window glass. UVB rays cause sunburn but don't pass through window glass.

A severe sunburn wreaks the most damage, but even a mild to moderate burn causes changes at the skin's cellular level. Repeated sunburns can lead to the development of skin cancers, which often are ignored because they are painless, and initially, barely noticeable.

Basal cell carcinomas are the most common skin cancers. They often occur on the face and scalp, but also are found on the back and limbs. Basal cell cancers are painless, but may itch or bleed. They sometimes disappear for a time, then reappear. Basal cells rarely metastasize, or travel to other parts of the body, but the cancers can become disfiguring if not removed.

Squamous cell carcinomas are more serious lesions. They may metastasize if not removed early. Squamous cell cancers may ulcerate or appear red and crusty.

Melanomas are the least common and most serious skin cancers and have the highest rate of metastasis and subsequent mortality. The number of people affected by melanoma is rising, especially among young adults in their 30's and 40's. A history of a severe, blistering sunburn in childhood or adolescence appears to be a contributing factor to the development of melanoma.

Even without sunburn, signs of damage from sun overexposure will appear and include skin dryness, wrinkling, and freckling; an increasing number of moles; and rough, reddened skin, especially on the face and hands, a precancerous condition called actinic damage.

Who is at risk for skin damage from the sun's rays? Well, basically everyone, so don't let your natural skin color or years of built-up tan from working outdoors lull you into believing you are immune. Some people are at higher risk for skin cancer, including blondes and redheads with fair, freckled skin that burns easily and blue, gray, or green eyes. Those with a family history or previous occurrence of skin cancer or a blistering sunburn at an early age are at higher risk, too, as are people with more than 50 moles and those who use tanning beds.

What can gardeners and others who spend a lot of time in the sun do to help prevent the development of skin damage and cancers?

Stay out of the hot sun between 10:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. If you must work outside, stay in the shade as much as possible. Wear light-colored, lightweight protective clothing, preferably long pants and a long-sleeved shirt.

If you work in shorts and short-sleeved shirts, apply a broad-spectrum sunblock with an SPF of 30 or higher to exposed skin 30 minutes before you go outside and reapply every 1 to 2 hours. Use a sport formula sunblock that you won't sweat away and won't burn if it gets in your eyes.

Wear a hat with a wide brim that protects your face, neck, and ears. Baseball caps leave the ears exposed, and visors are useless for protecting your scalp. Basal cell carcinomas often develop on the unprotected scalp or ear margins of those who wear visors or baseball caps.

Check your skin monthly for bleeding or crusting sores. An annual visit to a dermatologist is advisable.

See "Sunscreen FAQs" from the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD) and multiple articles on sun exposure and skin cancer at www.cdc.gov. The Skin Cancer Foundation also provides valuable resources on this important topic.

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