

# Sun Safe

By Suze Hargraves

It's that time of year again. It's time to throw off the blankets and get outside. Gardens are calling. Trails are waiting to be hiked and rivers and lakes are waiting for canoes, kayaks and boats. Mosquitoes and Black Flies are looking for their human smorgasbord. The sun is also out there waiting. It's waiting to nourish you, but if you're not careful it's also waiting to do some serious damage.

There are many sunburn prevention products on the market. Sorting through them is a daunting task. Which SPF? What does SPF actually mean? Does everyone need sunscreen? It's all a little confusing so let's see what we can do to sort it out.

First things first; let's get the terminology straight. WebMD gives this definition of SPF: "Sun protection factor (SPF) is a number on sunscreen labels that indicates how long skin can be in the sun and maintain a low risk for sunburn. The higher the SPF number, the longer it protects a person from burning rays." High SPF's are not a license to lounge around all day on the beach. Most people are adequately protected from sunburn by an SPF 15 unless you are very fair, a child, are taking certain medications (check with your healthcare provider) or have a history of sunburn.

By teaching ourselves the ABCs of sun protection we can avoid damaged skin and more importantly we can prevent such serious conditions such as skin cancer. This is a simple way to remember how to protect yourself in the sun:

**A = Away.** Stay away from the sun in the middle of the day (from 10 in the morning to 4 in the afternoon).  
**B = Block.** Use a sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 30 or higher to protect babies' and children's very sensitive skin.  
**C = Cover up.** Wear clothing that covers the skin, hats with wide brims, and sunglasses with UV protection. Even children 1 year old should wear sunglasses with UV protection.

The skin is the largest organ of your body. Yes, it's an organ-just like your heart, liver and lungs. The skin also protects all those organs, serving as a barrier between your internal workings and the world. It also helps regulate body temperature, and helps get rid of excess water and salt. Some skin cells even help us feel hot, cold and pain. The health of your skin is critical to the health of your body. By exposing unprotected skin to sun for long periods you're not just risking sunburn, you're risking your life.

This summer protect you and yours from the sun's potential to damage while still getting out there and absorbing that Vitamin D. Use sunscreen and use common sense. For more advice on staying safe in the sun visit [www.webmd.com](http://www.webmd.com).

Get out there and enjoy the sun, but do it safely. Your skin will love you for it.

Suze Hargraves is a staff member and writer for White Mountain Community Health Center, a non-profit health care provider serving the Mount Washington Valley. Call (603) 447-8900, Ext. 1, for an appointment or information.