



March 2002



## Dear Friends,

As I write this, I'm sitting on a beach in Florida under an umbrella wearing 30-SPF sunscreen as well as a long-sleeved shirt. In short, I'm doing everything I can to enjoy the beach and also make sure I'm protecting my fair skin from the hot midday sun.

Earlier today, in contrast, I walked to and from the workout center wearing a tank top and shorts without any sunscreen at all. I wanted my Northeastern sun-starved skin to soak up some of the healing ultraviolet rays of the sun, early enough in the day and for a short enough time, to reap the multiple benefits of sunlight without any of the risks.

Even if you're not going to be vacationing in the South this spring, everyone needs to cultivate "ultraviolet intelligence." In the Northern latitudes starting in mid-March, the sunlight gets strong enough to form vitamin D in the subcutaneous layer of fat beneath the skin. These ultraviolet rays will be available to work their magic - or cause harmful skin damage – until approximately October 15. Fortunately, the body can store up Vitamin D to some extent for the winter. In places like Florida, Southern California, and the Southwest, ultraviolet rays are strong enough year-round to produce vitamin D and/or skin damage.

To maximize the sun's health benefits while minimizing the risks, here's what you need to know:

1. Everyone needs vitamin D to be optimally healthy. Our bodies were designed to manufacture this fat-soluble vitamin most effectively through sun exposure. The amount of sun exposure it requires to reach optimal vitamin D levels varies with your skin tone. Those with lighter skin don't require as much exposure to produce vitamin D as do those with more pigment in their skins. Red-headed individuals have the most delicate sun-sensitive skins, while those with brown or black skin can tolerate far more sun exposure without burning. It is impossible to overdose on vitamin D produced from sunlight because your body will stop making it when you have enough.
2. Optimal levels of vitamin D are protective against osteoporosis, osteoarthritis, breast cancer, and bowel cancer. If you have any question about whether or not you are getting enough Vitamin D from the sun or from supplements, you can get a blood test to measure your levels. You want to shoot for a level that is in the upper range of normal, about 75-250 nmol/l. A good level associated with optimal health is 100 nmol/l. If you simply can't take a regular sun bath or get regular sun exposure, take vitamin D as a supplement. Cod liver oil is an excellent source. Minimum dose is 400 IU/day. Research is suggesting that many people don't get enough and that the toxic level of vitamin D taken orally is far higher than we've previously thought. In fact, some experts recommend that those who don't get any sun at all need 800-1,000 IU/day.
3. Small to moderate doses of sunlight (or ultraviolet light from a lamp, e.g., in a tanning salon) actually enhance immune system function. That is why lying outside in the sunlight and fresh air was the treatment of choice for tuberculosis back in the 1930's, before antibiotics were discovered. And this treatment worked! Moderation is the key. A dose of UV light that is enough to redden the skin decreases immune function. This is one of the reasons why individuals who get sun burned will often feel a bit ill or have a chill later that day. In addition to immune system enhancement, sunlight also increases serotonin levels in the brain, and therefore acts as an antidepressant. In addition, sunlight enhances many other biologic functions, including ovulation.
4. Virtually all skin wrinkling, sagging, age spots, and skin cancer are caused by the free-radical damage to the collagen layer in the skin. This is why it is imperative to limit your sun exposure and to use sun screen regularly after your daily sunbath (see below).

5. You can greatly reduce your risk of sun damage to your skin by following a diet rich in antioxidants -- rich in fruits and vegetables, the more colorful the better - and also by taking antioxidant supplements daily. Your multivitamin should have a good antioxidant formulation, and you may also want to add further antioxidant protection in the form of additional vitamin C, vitamin E, tocotrienols, alpha lipoic acid, and/or the oligomeric proanthocyanidins (OPC's). **I personally take the USANA "Health Pak 100" every day**, which contains the broadest spectrum of antioxidant protection available anywhere. Other good choices are Basic Preventive 5 and USANA "Essentials".

6. Research has clearly shown that antioxidants applied directly to your skin can help decrease and even repair past sun damage and wrinkling. I personally recommend and use Trienelle day and night creams and cleanser. Trienelle contains tocotrienols, which are very potent forms of the vitamin E complex that have particularly strong antioxidant effects on skin. This product line also contains a host of other antioxidant compounds and collagen builders and is very effective for helping prevent or shorten a sunburn. (Despite being careful, just about everyone I know sometimes gets a sunburn when we underestimate our sun exposure or get caught outdoors without sunscreen. I've seen dozens of sun-burned adults and children here in Florida on this vacation and wish I had enough Trienelle to pass out to each of them.) **I also use and recommend the Sensé line of cosmetic skin and hair products, which are also rich in a variety of antioxidants.**

In summary, try to get some daily sun exposure without sunscreen, exposing as much of your body as possible in the early morning or late afternoon. Start with 3 minutes of exposure and increase this by 30 seconds daily until you've reached a max of about 10-15 minutes. You can get sun exposure by standing by an open window with no glass blocking the uv light. Alternatives would be driving your car with the windows open or the sun roof open, or taking a walk with face, arms, and legs exposed. And take antioxidant supplements both internally and externally to minimize and repair free radical skin damage.

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This spring, remember that the sun is a great gift that supports all life on earth and lifts our spirits, especially after a long dark winter. You can enjoy all its benefits if you respect its power.

Have a wonderful Passover, Easter, and early spring,

***Christiane Northrup, MD, FACOG***

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(Supporting references to the above material can be found in The Wisdom of Menopause and on the Midlife Skin and Bones pages of this site's References section.)

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Thank you for being a part of our web Community. We hope you find the Empowering Women's Wisdom Updates helpful and health-enhancing.

To contact us, write:  
PO Box 199, Yarmouth, ME 04096 USA

(We regret that, owing to the volume of correspondence, Dr. Northrup is unable to personally address all letters.)

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