

Backcountry Health

sunscreen



The first warm days of Spring beckon us. “Get outdoors,” the warm breezes call. But to fully enjoy our outdoor work and recreation, it is wise to control exposure to sun.

The sun’s rays contain two types of damaging ultraviolet radiation (UVR). Ultraviolet A (UVA) penetrates the deep layers of skin. It can impair the skin’s immune system, contribute to cancer, and cause reactions with certain medications. Ultraviolet B (UVB) causes sunburn, and is directly linked to most superficial skin cancers. Both forms of UVR can cause eye disorders, premature aging, and worsening of some chronic systemic conditions such as lupus.

Seventy-five percent of UVR is transmitted between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. and UVR is most intense between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. The effects of UVR are enhanced by altitude, the season, and water, sand or snow reflection. Since we have plenty of sand, snow and water in Michigan, protection should be considered mandatory. Even cloudy days warrant caution.

The best protection is to keep skin covered (light-colored clothing reflects UVR), and avoid unnecessary exposure. But total skin coverage isn’t possible, practical or fun, so we need to always use sunscreen on all exposed skin. Active people should make the application of sunscreen part of their morning routine. Choose at

least an SPF 15 sunscreen with zinc oxide and PABA-related ingredients for protection from both UVA and UVB. Apply sunscreen liberally and often, especially where sweat or water may have washed it away. Wear sunglasses that block 90-100% of both UVA and UVB. Finally a wide brimmed hat can shade your face, ears and neck. 🌲

—Sharon Lee Maloney, R.N.