

Skin protection and young children

Key points

- Keep infants (0–12 months) out of the direct sun as much as possible.
- It's really important to protect a young child's skin when the ultraviolet (UV) radiation level is 3 and above.
- Use full shade as much as possible. Provide shade for the pram, stroller and play area.
- Cover as much of their skin as possible with clothing or wraps that are made of a closely woven material.
- Choose a hat with a wide brim that gives the face, neck, ears and eyes plenty of shade.
- Apply SPF 30+ broad spectrum sunscreen to small areas of the skin that isn't covered with clothing.

Children's skin

Damage to a child's skin begins with the first exposure to sunlight. A young child's skin will be damaged by the sun much more easily than an adult or older child as it is thinner and produces less melanin (skin pigment). As little as 10 minutes in the sun can damage a young child's delicate skin.

Skin damage (suntan, sunburn) is caused by over exposure to UV radiation (both UVA and UVB) from the sun. The damage builds up year after year and leads to premature ageing of the skin and increases the risk of skin cancer.

Children of all nationalities and skin types have very sensitive skin that will burn easily. Children with fair or pale skin are more likely to burn but even children with dark skin can get skin damage.

How can I protect my child's skin?

You need to protect your child's skin when the UV radiation level is 3 and above – this is when the UV rays from the sun are strong enough to damage the skin.

- Stay in full shade as much as possible when outside. Drape a shade cover over a baby's pram for protection from UV radiation.
- Cover up with clothes made from a closely woven fabric. Long sleeved, collared shirts and long pants are best. Use wraps for young babies.

- Put on a hat that gives plenty of shade to the face, neck, ears and eyes. Broad brimmed, bucket or legionnaire style hats are best.
- Use wrap around style sunglasses to protect the eyes.
- Lastly, use a SPF 30+ broad spectrum sunscreen on any uncovered skin.

Is it safe to use sunscreen on children's skin?

There is no evidence to suggest that sunscreen on small areas of a child's skin is harmful. Some sunscreens cause minor skin irritation on some babies. If you're worried, use products that are made for sensitive skin.

Sunscreen milks or creams designed for sensitive skin usually contain titanium dioxide or zinc oxide and are less likely to contain alcohol or fragrances that might irritate the skin.

Sunscreen should be put on clean, dry skin 20 minutes before going outside. Water resistant sunscreen should be used if swimming or playing in water. Reapply sunscreen every two hours or more regularly if it has been wiped or washed off.

How do I know when the UV level is over 3?

In South Australia UV levels are 3 and above from mid August through until mid May.

UV radiation cannot be seen or felt. The outside air temperature does not affect the UV level. Skin damage can still occur on cool and cloudy days. UV radiation can also be reflected off surfaces around you and onto the skin.

It's still important to protect your child's skin on clear, sunny days in June and July if you're going outside for long periods of time.

The SunSmart UV Alert is a new tool that shows the times of the day (eg 9.35 am – 4.15 pm) when the UV radiation levels will be 3 and above. The SunSmart UV Alert is issued by the Bureau of Meteorology daily.

Look on the newspaper's weather page or log onto www.bom.gov.au/weather/uv.

What about vitamin D?

Vitamin D is important for the development of strong healthy bones. Sunlight is the best source of vitamin D.

Most fair skinned children are likely to get enough UV radiation to maintain healthy vitamin D, doing their normal daily activities.

Talk to your doctor if you're concerned about your child's vitamin D levels.

Do children with very dark skin still need skin protection?

Children and adults with very dark skin have high levels of melanin in their skin. They need more exposure to UV radiation to produce enough vitamin D.

Very dark skinned children may not need to put on sunscreen when they're outside - but it's a good idea to wear a hat so their eyes are protected from UV radiation damage.

Talk to your doctor if you're concerned about your child's vitamin D levels.

For more information

The Cancer Council Australia. "Sun protection and infants" www.cancer.org.au/content.cfm?randid=299825

Child and Youth Health. "Health topics – Sun protection" www.cyh.com

Australian College of Dermatology. "A-Z of skin – baby and toddler protection" www.dermcoll.asn.au

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