

Skin-Deep

NEW LABELING LAWS, DILIGENCE—AND COMMON SENSE—CAN HELP PART THE CLOUDS IN OUR BEWILDERMENT OVER SUNSCREEN

BY MARIA LaPIANA

Being equal opportunity sun worshippers at our house, we have lots of sunscreen around. You'll find everything from sweet coconut-fragranced lotions labeled SPF 4 (why bother?) to numerous SPF 30 products, sports creams, gélées—even a Bullfrog SPF 50 that promises “waterproof and sweatproof UVA/UVB protection with one application.”

So I saw red (literally) when my son returned home from fishing recently with a crisp crimson nose, neck and back. “I put sunscreen on before I left,” he swore, failing to mention that he'd left six hours ago, and since gone swimming twice.

Pharmacist Rick Carbray sees it all the time. Teenagers who shop at his Apex Pharmacy in Hamden aren't thinking of ways to keep sunburn at bay; instead they “gravitate toward the bronzers and the sun oils,” he says. “Young people think they're immortal, that sun damage will take years and years. In fact one of my employees came in this week with sun poisoning. He'd fallen asleep at the beach with no sunscreen on at all. They just don't get it.”

It seems like a no-brainer: Sunscreen screens your skin from the sun, protecting you from burns now, and potentially from signs of aging or even skin cancer later.

But if it were as simple as that, sunscreen advice wouldn't be such a perennial favorite in the news. And the FDA might not have had to step in because we've been scammed by sunscreen labels for years (see box on new labeling law on next page). Although dermatologists have long promoted sunscreen use, and parents slather kids with the stuff all summer long, skin cancer rates are still on the rise. What are we missing?

To find out, we went to one of the country's leading experts: Dr. David J. Leffell, chief of

dermatologic surgery at the Yale School of Medicine. In 1996, Leffell and his colleagues discovered PTCH, the gene for skin cancer.

“Sunscreen is interesting,” he says. “It's FDA-regulated, it's safe and it works. The real question is whether the public understands how it works. I believe that the simpler the label the better.”

Referencing the new FDA rules, Leffell said that “SPF 30 is the best protection available,” so it makes no sense to boast that a product has an SPF of anything higher. Manufacturers that lay claim to sunscreens with an SPF of 50 or even higher, are pretty much just making it up.

A little background: SPF stands for “sun protection factor.” In the past, sunscreens with a high SPF were formulated to protect people from sunburn caused by ultraviolet B (UVB) rays. They didn't necessarily offer protection from ultraviolet A (UVA) rays, which have been associated with aging and skin damage. It is UVA rays that are believed to cause skin cancer.

Understanding that can go a long way toward helping people choose (and use) an effective sunscreen. Leffell says there are several important points to consider:

“Always look for a label that says a product offers ‘broad spectrum’ protection, meaning it protects against both kinds of UV rays,” he says. If a label claims a product is “waterproof,” don't believe it. After swimming or perspiring, you should always reapply sunscreen, regardless of what the label suggests. And don't think you are good to go if you applied a moisturizer or foundation that promises UV protection. “Those products do not take the place of sunscreen,” says Leffell.

Because sunscreen is by itself not a “magic

bullet,” the doctor advises you make sunscreen only part of a “total protection program.”

“Keep in mind that you can't see, hear, taste or smell UV rays,” says Leffell. “They're out there even on cloudy days,” so take precautions all year long. “And always be aware of the UV index. It's published in the news and online; there's an app that will tell you the UV index of your current location—and you can even set reminders to reapply sunscreen.”

Avoid the sun during peak hours, generally between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m., which is prime time for exposure to damaging rays. Wear protective clothing. “A white T-shirt provides an SPF of no more than four to six, which is virtually meaningless,” he says. “A tight weave, and dark fabrics protect far better. You can even buy clothing now that is rated for ultraviolet protection.

“Remember that no matter your age, sunscreen actually can prevent some of the changes that lead to the appearance of aging,” he says. “A woman in her 50s will live to at least 85, statistically, so it's never too late.”

Leffell allows it's not easy to convince teenagers to use sunscreen, when bronze skin is “in.” “What we really need is a ban on tanning parlors,” he says. “It's teenage girls who use them, and I see so many young women with skin cancer now. It's something we never used to see. I'm amazed . . . no matter how many times we send out the message.”

The Connecticut General Assembly passed a new law in May banning children under 17 from using indoor tanning beds.

“Applying sunscreen is something you have to start instilling in your children at a very young age,” says Leffell. “Think of it like brushing your teeth or putting on seatbelts. Before long, your children will start reminding *you* to do it.”