

House Calls

by Rikki Schuster

Ahhhh, it's finally here, the summer sun has returned like an old friend. We've been anticipating it for months, couldn't wait for it to shine down us once again as we enjoy the beauty of the Outer Banks' beaches. Let's not forget, however, that sometimes there can be too much of a good thing.

Although we all like to have the "healthy summer glow" of a bronze tan on our skin, it's best to be aware of the downfalls of overexposure to the sun. Short term effects of overexposure to ultraviolet light results in inflammation and sometimes blistering of the skin known as sunburn.

Your risk of sunburn increases with genetic factors such as fair skin, blue eyes, and red or blonde hair. Also, if you are taking certain medications, such as sulfa, tetracycline, amoxicillin or oral contraceptives, your risk of sunburn increases dramatically. You will want to contact your pharmacist if you have questions regarding your prescriptions and potential sun sensitivity.

Avoiding the sun from noon to three in the afternoon is the best prevention against getting sunburn. Remember that clouds do not screen out ultraviolet light on overcast days. If you do have to be outside during those peak hours, try to use a sunblock with an SPF of 15 or higher.

Those products that have lower sun protective values offer partial protection and minimal tanning. Some sunblocks resist water and perspiration, but you should reapply them after swimming or after prolonged exposure. Baby oil, mineral oil, or cocoa butter offer no protection from the sun, and actually increase your risk of burning.

For maximum protection, use

a physical barrier agent such as zinc-oxide ointment. These products are especially helpful on skin areas that are most susceptible to burns such as the nose, ears, back of the legs and back of the neck. Try to wear muted colors such as beige and avoid brilliant colors and whites, which reflect sun into your face.

Using a beach umbrella to escape direct sun exposure from above is advisable, just remember that a great deal of the ultraviolet light reflects off the water and sand, so you should still protect yourself with a topical sunblock.

If you do get sunburned, dip gauze or towels in cool water and lay them on the burned areas to reduce the heat and pain. You may apply aloe, cold cream, or baby lotion for comfort. For badly blistered skin, try applying a light layer of petroleum jelly to prevent anything from sticking to the blisters.

Soaking in a tub of cool water with either 'Aveeno' oatmeal or baking soda added provides soothing relief. You could take non-prescription medications such as aspirin or acetaminophen to relieve the discomfort.

Topical non-prescription burn remedies that contain benzocaine or lidocaine may be useful, but some people may have allergic reactions to these products. In rare instances when these home remedies are not effective, pain relievers, or short courses of cortisone drugs may be prescribed by a medical provider if indicated.

It is important to stay well hydrated after sunburn, so be sure to increase your fluid intake, especially water. If you develop a fever greater than 101, you have persistent vomiting or diarrhea, or delirium occurs, seek medical attention as soon as possible.

If you insist on tanning to achieve the "healthy summer

glow", you should try to limit your sun exposure on the first day to five to ten minutes on each side, then add five minutes per side each day.

Rikki Schuster is a certified Physician Assistant with over seven years of Emergency Medicine and Urgent Care experience; including three years on the Outer Banks. She is currently providing Medical House Calls for acute, non-life threatening illnesses in your home, workplace, hotel, or vacation cottage. She may be contacted by calling 252-475-2007 seven days a week.