One way to prevent skin cancer, sunburn, and skin damage is to completely avoid the sun. Most individuals, however, will not resign themselves to living in a dark cave, so they seek more practical ways to protect themselves through the proper use of sunscreens, sunblocks, and protective clothing.

According to an article in *The Journal of Investigative Dermatology*, everyone is exposed to the carcinogen sunlight. Epidemiology—all the factors that control the presence or absence of a disease or pathogen—indicates that the exposure to carcinogenic sunlight can take place several decades before a tumor arises.

Most sunburns and skin cancers are caused by UVB radiation. UVA rays can also contribute to skin cancer, as well as causing skin aging and wrinkles. Both UVB and UVA rays should be avoided at all costs. Sunblocks are creams, sprays, or lotions that reflect the sun’s rays. Sunscreens are chemical agents that absorb the sun rather than reflect it. Look for a good sunblock or sunscreen that promises to block both UVA and UVB rays and that has an SPF—sun protection factor—of a level of fifteen or higher. The sunblock zinc oxide offers the strongest protection against both UVA and UVB rays. Titanium dioxide is a type of zinc oxide that is more commonly found in many quality products.

For users of a sunblock or sunscreen, SPF should be taken into consideration. SPF is often confused with the protective strength of the product, but SPF is actually a measure of the amount of time one can expose one’s skin to the sun while using the product before the sun will burn the skin. For example, a sunscreen or sunblock with an SPF of 25 means that it will take 25 times longer for your skin to burn while using the product than it would without the product.

According to Dr. Lawrence E. Gibson, a dermatologist at the Mayo Clinic, sunscreens have an expiration date. Most sunscreens are designed to remain effective for up to three years. A sunscreen past its expiration date should be discarded. Additionally, sunscreen that has been exposed to very high temperatures for any length of time should be discarded.

An appropriate amount of sunscreen to use is 1 ounce (30 milliliters)—the equivalent of a shot glass. This should be used to cover all exposed parts of the body. That means that for a 4-ounce (118-milliliter) bottle, one-fourth of it will be gone after only one application. Sunscreen should be applied thirty minutes before going outside and reapplied every two hours—more if an individual has been swimming or sweating excessively.

Individuals should protect their skin while they are young. Studies indicate that 85 percent of lifetime sun exposure is acquired by the age of 18. Chronic repeated sun exposure can lead to the genetic changes which could cause skin cancer, so it is critical that children develop good habits regarding sunscreen at an early age. Additionally, infants under six months old should be kept out of direct sunlight at all times, because their skin is exceptionally sensitive to any of the rays of the sun.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In the medical field, dermatologists and their societies recommend the use of sunscreen coupled with avoidance of midday sun, wearing protective clothing, and regular application of a sunblock with a sun protection factor of 15 to 30. The sunblock should have both UVB and UVA coverage.

Another way to prevent sunburn, in addition to sunscreen, is by wearing protective clothing. A broad brimmed hat is a great way to protect one’s face and head from sunburn. Additionally, long- sleeved shirts and pants may offer some protection from the sun’s harmful rays.

When educating patients and youngsters about how best to protect themselves from overexposure to the sun, the best advice is to be prepared before planning a day in the sun. Heed weather reports and the listings of the UV index. These reports warn of the estimated time that ultraviolet rays are at their peak during the day. Avoiding the sun during these times and staying out of the sun during the peak hours from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. is good practice.

Because the effect of the sun’s rays does not appear until several hours after exposure, one cannot notice if he or she is getting sunburn. The full effect of sunburn is usually not felt until eighteen hours after the exposure.

1. For babies, the American Academy of Dermatology recommends using a sunscreen that contains only inorganic filters, such as zinc oxide and titanium dioxide, to avoid any skin or eye irritation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)