

# Your Suit of Armor

Take a look at your skin for just a minute. Go ahead. Really look at it like you were noticing it for the first time. Check out the skin on your hands, your palms, your neck, between your toes, around your eyes and ear lobes. Pretty awesome stuff, huh? No seams. No apparent beginning or end. Varying colors and textures. It's even replenishing itself right now as you move along in your day.

This miraculous outer covering is our body's largest organ. Skin not only serves to visually identify us as individuals, but it also works hard for us. You probably didn't wake up this morning thinking about the epidermis, dermis and subcutaneous layers of your skin and how they protect you. Without you having to think about it, your skin was keeping you warm, holding your muscles and bones in place, cushioning your vital inner parts and shielding them from dangerous bacteria and other environmental elements that could do harm if skin wasn't there. Essentially, it's like we're dressed in a soft suit of armor at all times.

Most of us might give our skin little thought in relation to our over all wellness. But the reality is that our skin is an important part of our body's natural defense system which is critical to our survival. For skin to continue doing its job, we need to care for it as we would any of our other major organs like our heart and lungs. Eating nutritious foods, drinking plenty of water, not smoking, and getting enough exercise and rest are great things to do for your skin. And it's especially important to protect your skin from too much sun exposure all year long as well.

We hear so many warnings about the sun being bad for our skin that it could make you wonder why Mother Nature put the big, bright, delightfully warm fire ball in the sky in the first place. Even more perplexing is this: How can something that's 93 million miles away from the earth make the most delicate plants grow, yet potentially cause us to develop life threatening skin cancers?

Well, because we are humans and not plants, the key words to remember about sun exposure are "*too much*". The truth is that we need sunlight. Regular moderate amounts of sunshine promote healthy skin and help our bodies produce and absorb vitamin D which benefits our bones.

So what is too much sun exposure? Whatever causes visible radiation damage to the skin; so in other words, a sunburn and even a tan. Ultraviolet (UV) rays react with a chemical called **melanin** that's found in most people's skin. It is your skin's first natural defense against the sun. Melanin increases in response to sun exposure by absorbing dangerous UV rays. The amount and color of melanin varies by individual and therefore results in different skin colors.



If you're naturally light skinned, you have less protective melanin to absorb UV rays and therefore are more likely to get sunburned. Cells are damaged when skin is burned. As burned skin heals, it thickens and starts peeling in order to protect itself from further damage. Darker skinned people have more melanin but they are not exempt from skin damage. Therefore, everyone needs protection from UV rays.

The risk of damage increases with the amount and intensity of exposure to sunlight. Children tend to be outside more often when the sun is most intense which increases their chances for skin damage. Others at risk are those who are constantly exposed to the sun including construction workers, lifeguards, landscapers, boaters, fishermen, farmers and habitual sunbathers. People who take certain medications like antibiotics may also become more sensitive to UV rays.

If you think that the sun's rays are potentially more damaging in warm weather months, you're partially right. The invisible UV radiation from the sun is most intense during summer. But even during winter months, UV rays reflect off of snow, sand, water, cement and grass, increasing the probability of sunburn. Cloudy days are deceiving because we tend to feel safer when direct sun rays are blocked. Ah, but don't be fooled. Harmful UV rays continue to filter through cool, cloudy skies and can damage your skin.

Remember also that seasonal timing varies by location. Winter in the U.S. is summer in Australia. If you plan to travel to a foreign country during its summer season, you'll need to protect your skin just as you would back home. Altitude and latitude also impact UV ray intensity. If you are hiking in the mountains, damaging UV rays get through the atmosphere easier because the air and cloud cover are thinner. You'll also need extra protection if traveling near the equator where the sun is strongest.

For more information on sun-safe skin or skin cancer, visit [anthem.com](http://anthem.com). Also visit the following sites:

National Cancer Institute - [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)  
American Cancer Society – [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)  
National Institutes of Health – [www.nih.gov](http://www.nih.gov)  
American Academy of Dermatology – [www.aad.org](http://www.aad.org)

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Sources:  
National Cancer Institute, [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)  
American Academy of Dermatology, [www.aad.org](http://www.aad.org)  
American Cancer Society, [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

This information is intended for educational purposes only, and should not be interpreted as medical advice. Please consult your physician for advice about changes that may affect your health.

