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# Sunscreen

To protect yourself from damage from exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation, apply SPF30 (or higher) broad-spectrum, water resistant sunscreen to any skin not covered by clothing.

For best protection during the daily sun protection times (when the UV level is 3 and above), use all five SunSmart measures. Sunscreen should be the last line of defence after clothing, a hat, shade and sunglasses.

The free SunSmart app tells you the sun protection times for your location and provides current UV levels. Sun protection times can also be found at [myuv.com.au](http://myuv.com.au), [bom.gov.au](http://bom.gov.au) and live UV levels are also available from [arpansa.gov.au/uvindex](http://arpansa.gov.au/uvindex).

## What is SPF?

The SPF (sun protection factor) indicates the amount of UV radiation that potentially reaches the skin if the sunscreen is applied according to directions. For example, SPF30 allows 1/30th (3.3 per cent) of UV radiation to reach the skin, filtering 96.7 per cent of UV radiation. SPF50 allows 1/50th (two per cent) of UV to reach the skin, filtering 98 per cent of UV radiation. Therefore the difference between SPF30 and SPF50 is marginal (1.3 per cent).

## What does 'broad spectrum' mean?

UV radiation is invisible energy from the sun and is the main cause of skin cancer. There are different types of UV radiation. Broad spectrum sunscreen filters both UVA and UVB radiation. UVA radiation penetrates deep into the skin, affecting the living skin cells that lie under the skin's surface. UVA causes long-term damage like wrinkles, blotchiness, sagging and roughening, and also contributes to skin cancer.

UVB radiation penetrates the top layer of skin and is the main cause of skin damage and skin cancer.

## How does sunscreen work?

Sunscreen ingredients work in two ways, scattering and/or absorbing ultraviolet (UV) radiation to stop it reaching the skin. Because sunscreen helps prevent UV radiation from reaching the skin, it helps prevent DNA damage which leads to skin cancer.

## Applying sunscreen

Apply sunscreen 20 minutes before you go outside and again every two hours (even if the sunscreen is four hours water resistant).

Use a generous amount of sunscreen. The average sized adult should apply one teaspoon of sunscreen (about 5 ml) to the face, neck and ears, and one teaspoon to each arm, each leg front of body and back of body. That is, 35 ml of sunscreen for one full body application, for an average-sized adult, every two hours.

Many Australians apply too little sunscreen and forget to re-apply every two hours. This means they usually get less than half the protection stated on the label.

Sunscreen can be easily wiped off, lost through perspiration and is often applied unevenly in the first place. Reapplying sunscreen every two hours helps keep you protected. Always reapply after swimming or water sports and after towel drying.



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### Which sunscreen should I use?

Choose a sunscreen that best suits your skin type and activity and that you find easy to reapply. Sunscreen can be bought as a cream, lotion, milk or gel. Price is no indication of quality. Make sure the sunscreen you choose is at least SPF30, broad spectrum and within its use-by date.

If you have sensitive skin and have had a reaction to a sunscreen, try a fragrance free product or choose sunscreens that use active ingredients such as zinc oxide and titanium dioxide which are unlikely to cause irritation or allergy. If you don't want sunscreen residue to remain on your hands, a gel may work best for you.

Not all sunscreens contain the same ingredients. If you are concerned about reactions to sunscreen, Cancer Council SA recommends performing a usage/patch test before applying a new sunscreen. Apply a small amount of the product on the inside of the forearm for a few days to check if the skin reacts, prior to applying it to the rest of the body.

While the usage/patch test may show whether the skin is sensitive to an ingredient in the sunscreen, it may not always indicate an allergy, as this may also occur after repeated use of the product. As with all products, use of any sunscreen should cease immediately and medical attention should be sought if any unusual reaction is observed. Professional assessment and testing by a dermatologist may be useful to identify the ingredient in the sunscreen that is causing the reaction.

### Sunscreen and babies

The use of sunscreen on babies under six months is generally not recommended as their skin is very sensitive. Physical protection such as shade, clothing and broad brimmed hats are the best sun protection measures. If babies are kept out of the sun or well protected from UV radiation by clothing, hats and shade, then sunscreen only needs be used occasionally on very small areas of the body.

For babies older than six months, look for sunscreens that have been dermatologically tested for sensitive skin. Many brands have a baby or toddler formula which is just as protective but much gentler on their skin.

Sensitive and toddler sunscreens usually use scattering ingredients and avoid ingredients and preservatives that may cause reactions in young skin.

You could also ask your maternal and child health nurse, pharmacist or doctor for advice.

It is recommended you do a usage/patch test on a small area of the child's skin to check for any skin reactions to the sunscreen.

### How long can you keep sunscreen?

Check the expiry date and storage conditions on the label. Most sunscreens last about two years from the date of manufacture. They should be stored below 30°C. If left in excessive heat (e.g. in the glove box of a hot car or in the sun on the beach), over time, the product may not be effective.

### Is sunscreen safe to use?

There is clear evidence that regular use of sunscreen helps to prevent skin cancer, including melanoma. Long-term studies of sunscreen use in Australia have found no harmful effects of regular use. The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) regulates sunscreens in Australia to ensure they are effective and safe for use.

### More information and resources

More information is available at [sunsmart.org.au](http://sunsmart.org.au). UV-protective clothing and accessories can be purchased at the Cancer Council SA's shop or online at [www.cancercouncilshop.org.au](http://www.cancercouncilshop.org.au).

**Acknowledgement to Cancer Council Victoria for the original development of this resource. This fact sheet can be photocopied for distribution.**

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