

Researchers Set Up Free Sunscreen Dispensers at a State Fair—And Here's What Happened

Kudos to those who use it, but according to a recent study chances are none of us is using sunscreen right.

BY RACHEL KESSLER

People make mistakes when it comes to applying sunscreen, which you might guess if you've had a recent sunburn, but new research published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology* confirms it. Researchers set up free sunscreen dispensers at the Minnesota State Fair and then observed 17,000 attendees. Over 93 observation hours, a mere 2,187 people were observed actually using the free sunscreen. More women than men used it. And all could use a bit of sunscreen education, the researchers concluded. Here are the key mistakes people make:

Not wearing sunscreen on cloudy days



On cloudy days, the number of people using sunscreen decreased dramatically, despite the UV index remaining at a dangerous levels. “UV index can still be high on a cloudy day,” reminds [Gary Goldenberg, MD](#), a Manhattan-based dermatologist and assistant clinical professor at Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital. “In fact, the risk of a sunburn may be even higher since there is a misconception that one cannot get burned on a cloudy day. Furthermore, sun

damage occurs on any day with sun exposure. That's why I advise my patients to apply sunscreen every morning, 365 days per year," says Dr. Goldenberg.

Not applying sunscreen to all exposed areas



The study also found that only one-third of participants applied sunscreen to all exposed skin. "Most people apply sunscreen in haste and therefore miss many areas of skin," says Estee Williams, a board-certified dermatologist in private practice in Manhattan. "For many, sunscreen is an afterthought altogether, and we're rushed when applying it. Or, we want to get the process over with. If we train ourselves to make sunscreen a priority and give it full attention, it will be easier to apply it correctly." Another point: Sunscreen bottles are too small, considering that the actual recommendation is to apply a shot-glass size portion to your entire body surface area every two hours. If you were to follow this direction, you would finish a bottle in just a few days. "Perhaps if companies were to make larger sizes, while keeping the price down, people would realize that they needed to use more," says Dr. Williams.

It's not enough to get all the exposed areas of your skin once, you have to reapply sunscreen every two hours or more frequently if you're sweating or in the water, says Heather Hamilton, MD, a dermatologist in private practice at the Dermatology Physicians of Connecticut. "Because that's hard to do, I also recommend sun protective clothing. You still need to apply and reapply sunscreen to the exposed areas, but at least a large surface area is covered with the sun protective clothing."

Don't forget your eyes



Thirty-eight percent of the sunscreen users in the study were not wearing additional sun protection, such as a hat, sunglasses, or long-sleeved clothing. Sunglasses are often overlooked as important sun exposure protectors. “It’s important to protect your eyes from sun’s harmful rays with sunglasses,” Dr. Goldenberg says. “Not only it is possible to develop a melanoma in the back of the eye, other skin cancers can also occur. In fact, the lower eyelid is a common place for basal and squamous cell skin cancers.

“I also recommend people seek the shade when possible especially between the hours of 10 am and 4 pm, says Dr. Hamilton. “For example, if you are going to eat lunch at a cafe outside, choose a table with an umbrella instead of one without.”