

Taking the trauma out of a sun tan

Near naked bodies basking on the beach – for some people it's the typical image of an Australian summer. In reality it's a slow way of ensuring our skin will be damaged forever. Depending on the frequency and duration of exposure to the sun, the most likely outcome is skin cancer.

Solariums generally provide a faster way of ensuring the skin is traumatised, leading to the sometimes fatal consequences.

So, preventing the use of solariums by fair skinned people, and limiting the intensity of the UV rays the solariums can emit, are regulations that are long overdue. Sadly, we can't rely on common sense to prevent skin cancer. As the Cancer Council advertisements state: "there is no such thing as a safe tan".

In recent years, the debate over vitamin D deficiency has clouded the issue of benefits and risks of sunshine.

Vitamin D is an essential vitamin. Usually we don't get a sufficient amount from our diet. We depend on exposure to the sun to stimulate our own body's production of vitamin D.

It was well over 100 years ago that researchers recognised the relationship between the then common bone disease, rickets, and sunlight. Sunlight was thought to have had many other health benefits too. So, given that most of the research at that time was undertaken in the often dark and dreary countries of the northern hemisphere, it seemed reasonable to expect a good dose of sunshine might cure a multitude of ills.

A little sunshine is very beneficial; but a large dose, or even a moderate dose taken over and over again, can be as dangerous as the most potent poison.

Sunlight is composed of several different types of electromagnetic radiation: infrared, ultraviolet (UV) and visible light. Infrared and visible light rays make up the majority of solar radiation reaching the earth's surface, and whilst there is some evidence that both may be involved in long-term skin damage, it is the UV radiation that is the most dangerous.

The amount of UV radiation reaching the earth, and therefore our bodies if they get in the way, is greatest at the equator and UV levels are greatest when the sun is closest to the earth – at midday and during the summer months.

In the UK, in Scandinavia and in other parts of northern Europe, where for most of the year sunny days are a rare occurrence, skin cancer is also comparatively rare and vitamin D deficiency more common. In Australia, the reverse applies.

Just living in Australia means most of us get enough of the sun to generate sufficient vitamin D. But there is certainly a significant minority of Australian residents where the low levels of vitamin D put them at an increased risk of osteoporosis – the brittle bone disease.

Most at risk are dark-skinned people, older people (especially those who spend much of their lives, day and night, indoors) and those people, usually women, who for cultural or religious reasons, keep covered up when outdoors.

How then do we balance what might seem to be conflicting advice as to how much sun to take in?

Firstly, protection from the sun is definitely necessary, particularly in summer and particularly for those couple of hours either side of midday. If you can't stay in the shade, make your own with long sleeves and a broad brimmed hat. The exposed parts need a sunscreen. It should be one with an SPF of 30+ (you'll still get a tan if that's what you want).

With regard to the vitamin D issue; the answer is a triple T activity. That is "tank-top for ten minutes". In other words during summer you should be able to stimulate sufficient vitamin D production by exposing face, arms and shoulders for no more than 10 minutes a day. This applies just about anywhere in Australia. In the winter time, depending on where you live 20-40 minutes "tank-top" exposure might be necessary.

If none of this is possible, ask your doctor or pharmacist for a vitamin D supplement. Remember, as well, sunscreens only work when applied properly.

For more information ask for the Fact Card titled *Sense in the Sun* from Self Care pharmacies. Phone the Pharmaceutical Society on 1300 369 772 for the nearest location; or check out the pharmacy finder on the Society's website at www.psa.org.au