Families are heading for vacations in the sun and water. What do you need to know to keep your family safe?

Sunlight on our skin provides vitamin D, which is important for our health. But only 15 minutes of sun each day will give you all the vitamin D you need.

The sun's rays are called ultraviolet A and ultraviolet B rays (UVA and UVB rays). These rays damage your skin and lead to early wrinkles, skin cancer and other skin problems. UVA rays penetrate deep into the skin and are the major source of early aging and skin cancer. UVB rays are the major source of sunburns.

To avoid skin cancer and cosmetic damage to your skin, you need suntan lotions with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 15 or higher. You also need UVA and UVB protection. Make sure that everyone has sunscreen everywhere the sun's rays might touch them, including ears, the back of the neck and bald areas of the scalp.

It doesn't work unless you use a lot of it -- enough to fill one “shot glass” per person. Make sure it hasn’t expired, and remember that sunscreen doesn’t last long if you’re sweating or swimming, so you’ll need to put more on every hour.

You need protection from UV rays between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. Since 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. is the most dangerous time, it's best to take a lunch break indoors.

Not all sunscreens are created equal. The Environmental Working Group found that of 785 sunscreen products with an SPF rating of 15 or higher, only 16% offer adequate protection from the sun’s harmful rays without containing potentially harmful ingredients. For more information, visit http://www.ewg.org/sunscreen/.

Sometimes sunscreen isn’t enough. If you’re in the sun for a long time, wear clothes made from tightly woven cloth, and stay in the shade when you can. To avoid damage to your eyes, wear sunglasses that block 99-100% of UV rays.
What About Indoor Tanning?

Whether you are outdoors in natural light or indoors under artificial UV light (sun-lamps or tanning beds), UV rays enter the inner layers of the skin. That makes the body produce melanin, and the skin looks darker. A tan is proof that UV has damaged some of the skin’s cells.

A tan is not healthy whether it is from indoors or outdoors, but a sunburn is even worse for your skin and your health.

“I got tan as a kid and it didn’t hurt me”

If you have any wrinkles or spots that you weren’t born with, the sun has damaged your skin. Check for changes and new spots every month, and see a dermatologist regularly to check for skin cancer.

About 60% to 80% of the sun’s rays can get through clouds and can reach swimmers at least one foot below the surface of the water. The sun’s rays can also reflect off of water, snow, and white sand.

More Tips to Remember

Whether you are walking, in a car, or sitting near a window, you are exposed to harmful UV rays. This can also happen in the shade or on cloudy days. Most of us are exposed to more than 10 hours of indoor UV rays every week. You or your child’s weekly UV-radiation exposure could easily total 20 hours even if you’re both mostly indoors!

When you’re in the sun, drink plenty of water, even if you aren’t thirsty. Sodas and alcoholic beverages will make you feel worse after a few hours in the sun.

Water Safety: Do’s and Don’ts

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The most important thing your kids can do to stay safe around water is learn how to swim. You can find swimming classes at your local pool or athletic center. Make sure that the class is taught by a qualified instructor who is CPR certified.

Set rules for family members based on their individual swimming abilities. Make sure your child knows just how far he or she can go in the water before they get in. And remember: water-wings and flotation devices aren’t a substitute for adult supervision. Make sure an adult within arm’s reach of a young child who can’t swim, whenever they are in or near the water.

You don’t necessarily have to delay swimming for 30-60 minutes after eating. However, undigested food, especially from larger meals, might cause cramps or discomfort.

At the Beach

At the beach, always look to see if there are any warning flags. Rip tides and strong currents can be dangerous. Make sure your children know the signs of being carried away, and decide on a signal to use if they are in distress. The best way to get out of a strong current is to gradually swim across it until you reach the beach.

If you think that your child is having difficulties in the water, ask the nearest lifeguard for their help.

At the Pool

At the pool, point out all the safety warnings posted nearby. Explain the different depths of the pool to young children, and pick the best place for your child to play according to his or her swimming abilities. Always make sure you child enters the pool feet first, unless it is clearly marked that the water is deep enough to dive in. If your child can’t swim, you can ask the pool attendant for a life jacket for him or her to wear in the water.

If you have a pool at home, have basic lifesaving equipment nearby (pole, rope, personal flotation device), and keep a cordless phone and first aid kit handy.

You don’t always need to delay swimming for 30-60 minutes after eating, but undigested food might cause cramps.