

**Guilt-free sunbathing: a growing number of experts recommend sun exposure, defying conventional wisdom. Here's why the sun can be good for your health - Ways to Live Naturally**

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NO TAN IS A HEALTHY TAN, say most dermatologists. They cite dozens of studies that link sun exposure to premature wrinkles, cataracts, and skin cancer. To prevent these problems, some recommend that you avoid the sun as much as possible and slather on sunscreen whenever you go out, even if you're only going out for a few minutes. But the sun doesn't just have a dark side. "Anybody who tells you you're supposed to wear sunscreen in the winter all day every day, even in the office, hasn't looked at the data," says Marianne Berwick, Ph.D., a researcher and epidemiologist at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City. In fact, research shows that sun exposure is necessary for good health; it boosts your mood, strengthens your bones, and may lower your risk for certain cancers, among other benefits.

The sun helps your body make vitamin D, and you can thank this nutrient for most of the sun's health benefits. You can get vitamin D by eating foods like fortified milk and fatty fish and by taking supplements. But many experts believe the sun is a better source of D because your body may not absorb an adequate amount of this nutrient from foods or supplements. But you won't get enough vitamin D if you go out in the sun wearing sunscreen.

Below we detail the five most important ways sunshine improves your health. We also tell you exactly how long you can stay in the sun to reap its benefits while minimizing your risk (sorry, it's still unsafe to lie out in the sun all day long).

#### Reason 1: Builds Your Bones

In the early 1900s, doctors prescribed sunlight to prevent rickets and other bone-deforming diseases. Current evidence suggests that sunlight fights osteoporosis, which is caused in part by a vitamin D deficiency. The vitamin D from sunlight helps maintain your blood levels of calcium and phosphate, two important bone minerals, and increases your intestines' ability to absorb calcium, says Michael F. Holick, M.D., Ph.D., a professor of medicine, dermatology, and physiology at Boston University Medical Center.

Research suggests that vitamin D from the sun helps keep your bones strong. A study in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* last September concluded that regular sun exposure may maintain calcium levels and healthy bones in men and women ages 79 to 96.

## Reason 2: Protects Against Cancer

Strong evidence suggests that the sun may protect you from certain cancers. For example, men who had low lifetime sun exposure were more likely to get prostate cancer at a younger age than men who got regular sun exposure, according to an August 2001 study of 365 men in the British journal the Lancet. A review study published in the Journal of Andrology this year confirmed this connection.

Researchers have found that the sun lowers the risk of breast and colon cancer as well. A 1999 study in the Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences showed that colon and breast cancers were more common in areas of the United States like the Northeast that receive little sunshine in winter due to a high latitude and air pollution. Another 1999 study by the Northern California Cancer Center in Union City, Calif., observed the lifestyles and diets of more than 5,000 women nationwide from 1971 to 1992 and concluded that vitamin D from sunlight and from food or supplements reduced breast cancer risk.

Experts attribute the sun's protective power to its ability to produce vitamin D in your skin. According to Holick, recent research shows the skin synthesizes vitamin D and then the blood circulates it directly to the breasts, colon, and prostate. In these organs, researchers believe, vitamin D inhibits cancer cell growth.

## Reason 3: Curbs Diabetes Risk

Researchers just recently began investigating the theory that vitamin D affects diabetes risk. A study on Finnish children, published in the November 2001 issue of the Lancet, showed that 2,000 IU of vitamin D given to children daily significantly lowered their development of type 1 diabetes. Researchers followed 10,366 Finnish children from birth to age 31. Because Finland gets little more than two hours of sunlight per day during the winter, researchers prescribed vitamin D supplements instead of sun exposure.

## Reason 4: Beats Depression

When days are shorter in the fall and winter, about 1 out of 4 people experience a mild form of the depression called seasonal affective disorder (SAD). Experts believe that getting less sunlight disrupts your body's production of the hormone melatonin, which induces sleep and regulates your circadian rhythms. Your body may be releasing melatonin into your bloodstream during the day instead of at night, when it should be released; the result is that you feel tired during the day, says Pamela Hannaman-Pittman, N.D., a naturopath at the Bastyr Center for Natural Health in Kenmore, Wash. Without the correct amount of melatonin, you may also experience other SAD symptoms like poor concentration and a reduced libido.

Dozens of studies show that the sun can relieve SAD. And a study in the August 2001 issue of Biological Psychiatry found that while participants who got artificial light

therapy found relief from SAD, subjects had better results when they got sunshine during the week as well.

#### Reason 5: Lowers Your Blood Pressure

In the winter, blood pressure rates rise, according to research published in 1997 in the American Heart Association's journal *Hypertension*. And, as with cancer risk, studies find that as you move away from the equator, which has the strongest ultraviolet radiation, high blood pressure rates increase as well.

In 1998, the *Lancet* published the results of a study that showed that systolic and diastolic blood pressure declined after subjects received six to 30 minutes of ultraviolet B radiation (UVB) three times a week for six weeks. The vitamin D your body produces in response to sunlight helps your intestines absorb calcium. Sufficient amounts of calcium, in turn, allow your arteries to maintain normal blood pressure levels.

#### The Bottom Line

Citing positive research, the sun experts we talked to agreed that moderate sun exposure offers benefits that shouldn't be missed. Robert Atkins, M.D., founder and executive medical director of the Atkins Center for Complementary Medicine in New York City, recommends sunshine to his patients to improve their energy, happiness levels, longevity, and overall health. "Sure there's a risk, but I think the benefits outweigh the risk," he says.

To reap these benefits, all you need to do is expose your face and arms--never staying out so long that you turn pink or burn. How long you can safely stay in the sun depends on your latitude (the farther you are from the equator, the more time you need), the season, and your risk factors (see "How Much Sun Should You Get?" previous page, for more details). Following this advice will give you the sun's health benefits, while minimizing your chance of wrinkles, cataracts, and skin cancer.

#### RELATED ARTICLE: How much sun should you get? (Consider This)

"Sunbathing for health is very different from sunbathing just to get a tan," says Richard Hobday, Ph.D., a researcher on sunlight therapy in London and author of *The Healing Sun* (Findhorn Press, 1999). To boost your mood, strengthen your bones, and enjoy other health benefits from the sun, follow the guidelines below for safe sunbathing without sunscreen.

If you're ...

Then you should ...

Fair skinned and prone to burning

Get 10 minutes of sun daily. If you stay out for longer periods, wear a hat or long sleeves and apply SPF 15 (with UVA and UVB protection) as directed. Try to get your 10 minutes and do outdoor activities before 10 a.m. and after 2 p.m.

Olive skinned and  
tan easily

Get 15 minutes of sun daily. If you're in the sun for longer periods, apply SPF 15 (with UVA and UVB protection) and reapply as directed, wear a hat or long sleeves, or seek shade.

Dark skinned

Get 15 to 30 minutes of sun daily If you're in the sun for longer periods, apply SPF 15 (with UVA and UVB protection) and reapply as directed, wear a hat or long sleeves, or seek shade.

At high risk for skin  
cancer (family  
history)

Get up to 10 minutes of sun daily, but use the following sun precautions for any longer periods. Apply SPF 15 (with UVA and UVB protection) and reapply as directed, wear a hat, long sleeves, and pants, and seek shade.

Taking a sun-sensitiz-  
ing medication like  
birth control pills

Get sun exposure according to your skin type (see above). If you experience a reaction to sunlight like a rash, see a doctor and consider dietary sources or supplements for vitamin D (at least 200 IU daily) instead of relying on sun exposure.

Melissa Nachatelo is the assistant editor at Natural Health. She enjoys the sun in moderation and applies sunblock (at least a shot glass full each application) when hiking or visiting the beach.

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