



Keeping Babies Healthy in the Sun

Babies can quickly suffer the short- and long-term damage of sunburn and heat stroke, so keeping your baby safe in the sun is crucial.

Sunburn can cause pain, fever, and dehydration. And just one sunburn during childhood raises the risk of melanoma (the most deadly type of skin cancer) as well as wrinkles later in life.

Keep your baby completely out of the sun as much as possible before 6 months of age. When you do go outdoors, be particularly careful in the early months about taking all the following precautions.

How and when sunburns happen

The sun is strongest between 10 and 4 o'clock, so when you can, time your stroll or outside play with your baby earlier than 10 or later than 4. When you do venture out, keep in mind that the sun's rays bounce off surfaces like water, snow, cement, and sand.

But your baby can also get burned at other times of day and on cloudy or cool days. Why? Because it's not the heat of the sun that burns the skin but the sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays.

UV rays can damage the skin at all times of day, all year round, even in the middle of winter. And a baby's thinner, more delicate skin is especially vulnerable.

You can't feel these when they hit your skin, but you'll see the effects later. (It can take several hours for the redness and pain of a mild first-degree burn to appear.)

Keep your baby in protected spots

Use the sunshade on your baby's stroller or carriage whenever you're outside.

Try to keep your baby in the shade – under a tree or umbrella, for example. You may be surprised to learn that shade provides only partial protection against UV rays. Without sunscreen or other protection, even a baby in the shade can get sunburned.

If you're longing to spend your day at a beach or park, an outdoor sun tent with built-in UV protection can keep your baby cool and protected.

Dress your baby in protective clothing

Cover your baby's arms and legs in lightweight, light-colored clothing. Light colors reflect the heat and keep skin cooler than dark colors, which absorb heat.

Fabrics with a tight weave protect skin better than loosely woven fabrics. (Hold the fabric up to the light. The less light you see shining through, the tighter the weave.)

You can find clothing such as swimsuits and T-shirts made from fabric with sun protection built into it. These products can be a little pricey, but they might be a good investment if you often find yourself outdoors with your baby.

Wear a hat!

Whether your baby is bald or has a full head of hair, a hat is a must. Choose a hat with flaps in the back for neck protection and a brim that's wide enough to shade the face. A brim that protects the ears is better than one that protects only in front.

If your baby will wear them, try a pair of UV-protective sunglasses.

Slather on the sunscreen

Choose a sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15. Look for the words "broad spectrum" on the label. "Broad spectrum" means the product protects against both UVA and UVB rays. UVB rays are more likely to cause sunburn and wrinkling, while UVA rays cause damage deeper in the skin.

Apply sunscreen 15 to 30 minutes before heading outdoors, and reapply it every two hours. Make sure you cover all exposed areas of your baby's skin, including the tips of the ears, the back of the neck, and the tops of the feet.

If your baby goes into the water, reapply sunscreen as soon as you towel him off – even if it's been less than two hours since you applied it.

Keep drinking

Keeping your baby hydrated with breast milk is best. If you are bottle feeding you may find your baby wants smaller but more frequent feeds. Avoid offering water before 6 months of age. Babies fill up on water rather than the nutritious breast milk or formula.

Remember to keep yourself hydrated also!