

Why sunshine is good for you

Summer is here at last! And it looks set to stay until the weekend. Expect the beaches to be packed with thousands of day-trippers and take to the glorious countryside to make the most of the fine weather.



Hurrah the sun has finally come out! And those clever folks at the MET office are predicting that this weekend will be a real scorcher. Britons will no doubt therefore be stocking up on barbecues, booze, food and, of course, sun cream.

And while you should always make sure your skin is protected from excess sunshine which can lead to cancer, experts also believe that the right mixture of sunscreen and exposure to sunlight is actually good for us.

For example, scientists at the University of Edinburgh think sunlight could help prevent diseases such as cancer, diabetes and multiple sclerosis. They claim that wearing sunscreen all the time starves the body of vitamin D, a nutrient absorbed by the skin from sunlight that is thought to protect us from various conditions.

Vitamin D is in fact thought to protect us from more than 25 chronic diseases and keeps bones and teeth healthy. It is also believed to promote a healthy immune system and regulates cell growth which can be a key factor in the development of cancer. However, around 60% of the population have insufficient levels of vitamin D in their blood. One of the easiest ways to redress this imbalance is to expose your skin to sunlight. It is worth noting, however, that just ten minutes of daily exposure to sunlight is enough to give us the vitamin D we need, so overdoing it in the sun is never a good idea.

Professor Mary Norval, who led the team from the University of Edinburgh Medical School, said: "Vitamin D is now implicated in the prevention of an increasing number of non-skeletal disorders. These include internal cancers, such as colon, breast, prostate and ovarian cancers and autoimmune diseases like multiple sclerosis and insulin-dependant diabetes.

"Sunscreens shield the body from the type of UV light needed to make vitamin D, so covering any exposed skin with sunscreen at all times is not advisable. Despite the distinct possibility that the ozone layer will repair itself in the coming decades, the take home message from the research so far is that we should strike a balance between the positive effects of vitamin D formation and the serious negative effects of too much sun exposure."

Who doesn't feel better when the sun shines? This is because sunlight stimulates the pineal gland in the brain which produces certain chemicals known as tryptamines which improve our mood. This is why the arrival of spring brings relief to thousands from seasonal affective disorder, or SAD. This is caused by low levels of serotonin production when people are deprived of sunlight in the cold, dark winter months.

Skin cancer figures have reached around 65,000 in the UK, and around 7000 Brits annually contract a malignant melanoma which results in 1600 deaths each year. And excess exposure to sunlight not only leads to skin cancer - it also makes you four times more likely to develop cataracts in your eyes, while sunburn can damage your body's DNA and the effectiveness of white blood cells, which fight disease.

Experts advise that you expose your body to the sun gradually until you have developed a base tan and that you should only sunbathe for a maximum of 30 minutes on your first day enjoying the sunshine. You can gradually add extra time as your base tan develops.

After-sun lotion will moisturise your skin and calm any burnt areas, while pale skin should not be exposed to the sun without a strong sun screen being applied first. Finally, make sure your sunglasses offer UVA and UVB protection to protect your eyes from cataracts.