UV Safety

Summer officially arrived late last month, making now the perfect time to head outdoors and enjoy the sunny weather.

There are inherent risks, though, which is why the United States Department of Health and Human Services has chosen July as Ultraviolet (UV) Safety Month. The goal is to spread the word about how important it is to protect everyone's skin from these harmful UV rays.

"I see a lot of people this time of year, when it starts to get really hot," said Tracy Ramsey, a Family Nurse Practitioner at Lawrence County Memorial's Primary Care Clinic. "Sometimes they don't realize how much they've been out in the sun. They come in sunburned and they're going to be miserable."

Health experts note that your skin is your body's largest organ, and protects you from heat, sunlight, injury and infection. The sun's ultraviolet rays can damage your skin in as few as 15 minutes. Yet, some of us don't consider the necessity of protecting out skin.

"Protection from the sun, lots of it, is important," Ramsey said. "Hats, clothing, lotions. You need to use anything like that you can get your hands on to keep the sun off of you."

Industry leaders stress that by using a layered approach for sun protection consisting of shade, clothing, a cap, sunglasses and sunscreen, we can significantly reduce our exposure to skin cancer. According to the Centers for Disease Control, skin cancer is the most common cancer in the United States. Every year, nearly five million people are treated for skin cancer at a cost of more than $8 billion. There are about 72,000 new cases annually, of which 9,000 are melanoma deaths, the deadliest form of skin cancer.

"The more time you spend out in the sun, the more you're at risk for skin cancers and melanoma," Ramsey said. "It's good to be very diligent about checking any moles and sores, and anything like that that comes up and looks suspicious."

Medical experts stress that it doesn't matter your skin tone, anyone can get skin cancer.

The good news is; most skin cancers are preventable.

The strength of the UV rays reaching the ground depends on a number of factors, experts say. These include:

• Time of day: UV rays are strongest between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.

• Season of the year: UV rays are stronger during spring and summer months, although this is less of a factor near the equator.

• Distance from the equator: UV exposure goes down as you get further from the equator.

• Altitude: More UV rays can reach the ground at higher elevations.

• Cloud cover: The effect of clouds can vary. Sometimes cloud cover blocks some UV from the sun and lowers exposure, while some types of clouds can reflect UV and increase exposure. What's important to know is that UV rays can get through, even on a cloudy day.

• Reflection off surfaces: UV rays can bounce off surfaces like water, sand, snow, pavement or grass, leading to an increase in UV exposure.

Skin cancers are only one result of getting too much sun. Sunburn is an obvious short-term risk of too much exposure to UV rays. Long-range exposure can cause early skin aging, wrinkles, loss of skin elasticity, dark patches and pre-cancerous skin conditions, such as dry, scaly and rough patches, according to skin care experts.

Furthermore, the sun's UV rays increase a person's risk of cataracts and other eye problems. They can also suppress the skin's immune system.

Fortunately, there are easy measures to minimize the risks that come with sun exposure. First of all, UV light can be blocked by wearing protective clothing, including a hat. Secondly, remaining in the shade, especially when UV radiation is most intense at midday makes common sense.

Also, choosing the proper sunscreen and applying it correctly is important, and it's wise to stay away from artificial sources of UV light, such as those on a tanning bed.

Starting at an early age is optimal, Ramsey says.

"Start them with the skin protection when they're young. Let them know what the risks are," she said. "Teach them when they're young and they're going to continue it when they're older."