

Protect your skin – naturally

By Karen Keady
Correspondent

As we ease into spring, the days are growing longer by a half-hour every month. Warmer weather beckons us into our yards, gardens, parks and onto nature trails to hike, bike or walk the eager hounds — hungry for the sun.

Protecting our skin from the elements during outside activities, protection from the soil we love, and the sunshine we crave is something many people neglect, or simply forget to do. Even worse, they use products containing harsh and toxic chemicals.

The skin is the first barrier of defense against an onslaught of radiation, bacteria, fungal skin infections, parasite invasion, and viral diseases such as West Nile virus.

Here are some healthy, easy-to-use, effective and affordable options for the health-conscious consumer, to cut through the hype and learn what works ... naturally!

Sunscreen: According to the American Cancer Society more than 2 million people are diagnosed with skin cancer in the United States each

year. As a former dermatology nurse, I have seen this firsthand, assisting in surgeries to remove basal or squamous cell carcinomas, some serious enough to require skin grafting. The third type of skin cancer, deadly malignant melanoma, is life-threatening.

Both the A.C.S. and most dermatologists recommend a broad-spectrum sunscreen, SPF 30. A lower SPF is not adequate; higher usually costs more and is not always more effective. Choosing the RIGHT sunscreen is equally important.

Chemical vs. Physical: Chemical sunscreens are made of synthetic compounds (manufacturers call them organic filters) that absorb UV radiation. They are in cream or lotion or tinted makeup forms that, once applied, absorb into the skin and must be re-applied every two hours, as they are not photo-stable. (Photo-stability is an ingredient's ability to remain effective after exposure to sunlight.) The FDA does NOT require a sunscreen to be tested for photo-stability.

According to the *Archives of Dermatology*, as well as a publication in *Environmental Science & Technology*

in 2006, significant health concerns have been raised about cream sunscreen ingredients, namely Avobenzone, Octocrylene, and Oxybenzone. Children and pregnant women have been advised not to use products containing these chemical ingredients.

Octocrylene is an endocrine disrupter, a skin irritant and contributes to contact dermatitis. Avobenzone generates free radicals above healthy levels after being on the skin for only one hour. Oxybenzone, a chemical UV B filter, has been found to negatively impact our reef ecosystems.

Wastewater treatment plants are unable to filter out these harmful chemicals, and they have also been found in fish.

Read sunscreen ingredient labels, as these chemicals are being absorbed into your body via the skin, and are toxic.

Physical sunscreens contain extremely fine particles of minerals such as zinc oxide that remain on the skin's surface, which actually create a barrier to reflect the sun's rays. They last for hours on the skin, are photo-stable, are good for sensitive skin, are hypoallergenic, anti-inflammatory, water-resistant and will not

clog pores. This sunscreen is safe for everyone. Wearing a hat is also considered a physical barrier protection.

Mosquito repellents : There are many alternatives to toxic insect sprays, in fact mosquitoes that carry diseases are growing resistant to DEET. In addition, DEET has been linked to a number of health concerns, including birth defects. The CDC in the U.S. maintains that DEET does not present a health concern, however looking at natural plant-based repellents could be more healthy, and more effective.

Oil of lemon eucalyptus: Look for products that contain at least 26 percent oil of lemon eucalyptus. The CDC recommends this as effective protection.

Picaridin: This is a chemical derived from pepper; it may be listed as KBR 3023 or by its chemical name on a product. It has shown great promise as being an effective DEET alternative.

Citronella oil: Used for more than 60 years as insect repellent, it works!

Soybean oil: Repels insects and mosquitoes. May need to be re-applied every couple of

hours. Considered to be the most effective of plant-based repellents, some studies indicate it lasts up to seven hours.

Geraniol: Comes from the oil of geraniums. Discovered in the late 1990s, this was the first alternative to DEET, offers protection from insect bites from two to four hours.

Gardening safety: According to the National Skin Care Institute, there are many potential soil-borne bacteria- and infection-causing fungi found in soil and plant materials which then enter the skin through small abrasions, plus the parasitic infections such as toxoplasmosis which presents a serious health hazard to pregnant women.

Toxoplasmosis is transmitted to the soil or litter box. When a cat eats a small, infected critter, the parasite is passed from the cat feces into the soil. Toxoplasmosis represents a serious health hazard to a fetus, via the contaminated litter box, cleaned by the pet owner.

Wearing gloves when doing any sort of outside yard work or gardening and then washing hands and arms in hot soapy water afterwards is the safest way to protect yourself.

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Skincare specialist Karen Keady has a background in dermatology nursing as well as national certification as a Master Esthetician. NCEA certification is an advanced 1,200-hour course in



skincare, above and beyond state board requirements for Esthetician licensing.

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