Under the Sun

July 1, 2002 By Tim Murphy

Bad news, HIV beachcomber: The sun is your enemy. Well, it's not that bad, but a recent University of Texas study concluded that ultraviolet B (UVB) rays can raise viral loads. Add increased solar sensitivity in HIVers on such drugs as Bactrim (and other sulfa-based meds), tricyclic antidepressants and even aspirin -- plus the long-known fact that HIVers are at higher risk for melanomas due to exposure to ultraviolet A (UVA). The take-home for sun-worshippers with HIV is simply a more emphatic version of that for neggies: No matter how Ibiza-licious it may make you feel, there is no such thing as a healthy tan. That dark, delicious brown is your poor skin's feckless way of fighting off toxic rays. The golden rule for skin protection? Stay out of the sun completely -- or buy a burqa. But since you're going to do it anyway, when you do sunbathe:

1. SCREEN THYSELF

That means using a sunscreen not only with an SPF of 30 to 45 (*SPF* stands for *sun-protection factor*) against UVB rays, which cause the actual burn, but with some *stated* protection against UVA rays, which cause the invisible skin damage that can lead to cancer. (Hint: Look for ingredients like titanium dioxide, zinc oxide or anything that ends in *-benzone*.)

2. SLATHER IT ON

Apply lotion everywhere at least 30 minutes before sun exposure and reapply every two hours thereafter. *Waterproof* is an advertising term: If you've been in the water for more than a half hour -- or are sweating a lot -- you need to reapply. And truth be told, it's better to use an SPF 15 thoroughly and correctly than to pretend that one dusting of 30 to 45 will do the trick for a six-hour bake.

3. IT'S A WRAP

Wraparound, that is. These supercool shades provide your eyes with the ultimate in solar protection because they bar UVA and UVB rays from all angles -- as long as they indicate UVA/B protection. And make sure you're packing lip balm with at least an SPF 15.

4. HARM-REDUCE

Do you really have to lie out like a filet of pan-seared perch from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m, when UV rays are at their worst? Do you really think *partly cloudy* means those rays can't reach you? (They can and they will.) Would it really be so bad to throw on that gauzy-weave Moroccan caftan when Ra is at his noontime peak?

5. SHOULD YOU BURN

-- and the lighter your skin, the likelier you will -- don’t say we didn’t warn you. Drink lots of water or other noncaffeinated, nonalcoholic liquid to rehydrate, take aspirin for the pain, and down potassium-rich bananas or OJ to reboost your energy. Just to be topical, apply aloe vera gel or calendula (herb-based) ointment, break open a capsule of vitamin E and rub it on, or, if you’re the crunchy type, try plain yogurt (then have someone lick it off), a water-and-cornstarch mixture or undiluted apple cider vinegar. Compresses (20 minutes, several times daily) of cooled chamomile tea and witch hazel on sterile cotton also soothe, as does a little baking soda in a lukewarm bath.

6. IS THAT A BLISTER?

Visit your doc pronto, as you should if at any time you happen to notice black or multicolored spots that have an asymmetrical shape, irregular borders that look like they might spread and a pencil-head diameter. Get a thorough annual skin exam anyway, by either a dermatologist or a savvy doc who will send you to one if she spots suspicious, uh, spots.

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