There is no such thing as a “healthy tan!” Bronzed skin may be attractive to most, but for dermatologists, it’s damaged skin. The sun’s ultraviolet (UV) rays can cause skin damage in a few as 15 minutes. However, health care providers also want us to enjoy the outdoors, exercise, and participate in physical activity.

**What is the risk?**
Simply put, the risk is for skin cancer. The UV rays in sunlight damage skin cells. Blood vessels open up to help the healing of the outer layers of skin making the skin red and tender (sunburn). Some cells can’t be saved and are discarded (peeling). The healing and replacing of skin cells is not a perfect process and DNA damage that occurs can be permanent. These changes can lead to skin cancer. A single harsh sunburn and triple the lifetime risk for skin cancer. Therefore, vigilance with regard to sun exposure is crucial.

**How do we create a healthy balance?**
See recommendations:

**Seek out shade:** An umbrella, tree, or other shelter is a good start for protection, but alone it isn’t enough to eliminate the risk.

**Clothing:** Cover your skin with long-sleeved shirts and long pants/skirts. Tightly woven fabric is the best protection. Regular T-shirts will not provide adequate protection alone, especially if wet. Also, darker colors provide better protection than lighter. Some specialized clothing is certified with a particular SPF factor if desired.

**Hat:** A hat (not visor) with a brim that goes all the way around is ideal. Tightly woven fabrics (not straw), preferably darker in color, will offer good protection. If a baseball cap is chosen, another form of protection (clothing, shade, sunscreen) must be used for the neck and ears.

**Sunglasses:** UV rays can contribute to an increased risk for cataracts. Sunglasses that block UV rays (both UVA and UVB) offer the best protection, and also protect the skin surrounding the eyes. Most sunglasses sold in the US meet this standard, regardless of cost.

**Sunscreen:** A broad spectrum sunscreen, with SPF of at least 15, should be put on prior to going outside. A thick layer on exposed skin is recommended (get someone to help you with your back!), and can be used in combination with other protective measures to provide good coverage. Sunscreen works by absorbing, reflecting, or scattering sunlight. It uses chemicals to protect skin cells from UV rays. There are different chemicals in different products, so if you experience irritation from one, try another. A few notes on sunscreen:

▪ The SPF factor should be at least 15, and the sunscreen should be broad spectrum.
▪ Sunscreen wears off, so reapply if you are in the sun more than 2 hours or after swimming, sweating, or toweling off.
▪ Sunscreen has an expiration date, so check the bottle before use. If there is not date on the bottle, the shelf life is no more than 3 years, but shorter if exposed to higher temperatures.
▪ Some cosmetics contain SPF, but be sure they are 15 or higher before depending on them for adequate coverage.

As a final note, it’s important to realize that tanning beds also expose your skin to UV rays and are not recommended for use as an alternative to the sun.

Feel free to contact us at the health center with any questions or concerns about your sun exposure.

http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/skin/basic_info/sun-safety.htm