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Why The New York Times Advises Complete Avoidance of Sunshine

Analysis by Dr. Joseph Mercola ✔ Fact Checked | July 03, 2023

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The New York Times recommends you only venture out into the sun if you're prepared to fully block its rays
- In addition to applying sunscreen every two hours "across every exposed bit of skin, including your hands and the tips of your ears," they suggest using a hat, long-sleeved clothing and an umbrella
- A full face mask that covers your face up to your eyes — or one that goes completely over your head — is also recommended, along with sun capes, gloves, sunglasses and visors
- The fear-based article, unfortunately, is doing an extreme disservice to anyone who reads it and comes away believing they must shun the sun entirely
- Not enough sun exposure increases the risk of chronic diseases including certain cancers, diabetes, multiple sclerosis, autism, Alzheimer's disease, cardiovascular disease and more

The New York Times published an article advising readers, "How to Get Absolutely No Sun This Summer."[1] I'd like to say this is a joke, but it's disturbingly real. It begins by stating there's "no such thing as a safe tan," warning that should you avail yourself of a bit of daily sun, you're setting yourself up for sunspots, skin discoloration, premature aging and skin cancer.

While too much sun can, indeed, harm your skin, the article completely neglects to tell readers that too little sun can be equally detrimental to your health — and likely more so.

New York Times Recommends Full Face Masks, Staying Indoors

This summer, The New York Times recommends you only venture out into the sun if you're prepared to fully block its rays. In addition to applying sunscreen every two hours "across every exposed bit of skin, including your hands and the tips of your ears," they suggest using a hat, long-sleeved clothing and an umbrella.

But that's not all. A full face mask that covers your face up to your eyes — or one that goes completely over your head — is also recommended, along with sun capes, gloves, sunglasses and visors. Or, you could simply avoid going outside altogether. Dr. Maressa C. Criscito, an assistant professor of dermatology at New York University Langone Health, told the Times:[2]

> *"Coupling your sunscreen with a hat, or UPF clothing, or sitting under an umbrella, or going indoors for lunch during the high, peak UV index — those are all things that you could do in addition to your sunscreen application."*

The Times even worked in what appears to be a cheap shot at yours truly, noting that a dermatologist they spoke to, Dr. Shereene Idriss from New York City, "bristled at the mention of the anti-sunscreen posts that occasionally pop up on social media, shared by self-proclaimed health experts who believe seed oils to be at the root of all modern ailments."[3]

Yet seed oils are part of the equation when it comes to the sun and your health — I'll explain why below. The fear-based article, unfortunately, is doing an extreme disservice to anyone who reads it and comes away believing they must shun the sun entirely.

What Does the Science Say About Sun Exposure and Cancer?

The biggest fear many have about the sun is that it may increase the risk of skin cancer. The Times certainly played on this fear, writing:[4]

> *"In the 1700s, the average life expectancy was 30 to 40. The median age at which melanoma is diagnosed is 65," she [Idriss] said. "If people seemed to get less skin cancer before, she argued, it was because they weren't living long enough to develop it."*

But this doesn't paint the whole picture, which is far more complex. On a typical sunny day, your body may produce up to 25,000 international units (IU) of vitamin D,[5] which has anticancer effects. Many people aren't getting these benefits, however, because they're not in the sun enough to optimize their vitamin D levels.

The global prevalence of vitamin D deficiency (defined as a level of less than 20 ng/mL) and insufficiency (defined as a level of 20 to less than 30 ng/mL) is 40% to 100%.[6] Further, 20 ng/mL has repeatedly been shown to be grossly insufficient for good health and disease prevention and, to maintain your health, levels below 40 ng/mL (100 nmol/L) are not recommended.

For example, research has shown that once you reach a minimum serum vitamin D level of 40 ng/mL, your risk for cancer diminishes by 67%, compared to having a level of 20 ng/mL or less.[7]

The fact is, strong associations with cancer can be found depending on your location in relation to the equator. Dr. Paul Saladino, author of "The Carnivore Code," a book on nose-to-tail animal-based eating, and host of the Fundamental Health Podcast, said, "With distance from the equator, we know that there are higher rates of colon, breast, pancreas, ovary, brain and kidney cancers, and the blood cancer multiple myeloma — as you move farther from the equator."[8]

Outdoor Workers Have Lower Breast Cancer Risk

The idea that the more time you spend in the sun, the higher your risk of skin cancer becomes is also misleading — and far from black and white. A 2021 study published in

the BMJ Occupational & Environmental Medicine[9] found no association between a history of working outdoors and breast cancer. Further, after the age of 50, more solar ultraviolet B radiation (UVR) was associated with a lower risk of breast cancer.

"The findings indicate that long-term UVR may decrease the risk of late-onset breast cancer," the study found, adding, "Advice about regularly spending a short period of time outside in the sun could be considered especially for female indoor workers."[10] A 2023 systematic review similarly found no increased risk of developing cutaneous melanoma among people who primarily work outdoors.[11]

The Times statement that a tan is unsafe is also misleading, because melanin, the substance that makes your skin look darker after sun exposure, is intended to help prevent sunburn. This is why intermittent sun exposure — occasional exposure followed by many days or weeks of little to no exposure — tends to be more problematic than regular, frequent sun exposure, as you're more likely to burn and cause DNA damage in your skin.

Regular exposure, on the other hand, ameliorates this risk, as it engages innate adaptive systems in your skin, your melanin in particular, that are explicitly designed to prevent DNA damage from UV light exposure. In my **interview with Ari Whitten**, author of "The Ultimate Guide to Red Light Therapy," she explained:

> *"So, we have this system built into our bodies that's designed to allow us to get all these benefits of sunlight without the DNA damage and the increased skin cancer risk. Framing light as a nutrient is the best way of understanding this.*
>
> *Just as we require adequate nutrients from the food we eat, just as our bodies require physical movement to express normal cell function, we also require adequate light exposure to express normal cell function. The absence of that exposure to sunlight creates abnormal cell function. And there are myriad mechanisms through which this occurs.*
>
> *Vitamin D is obviously the most well-known one that regulates over 2,000 genes related to immune health, musculoskeletal health and many other things. But*

there are many other mechanisms [as well]."

Skin Cancer Is Linked to Linoleic Acid

Regarding the seed oils quip in The Times, it's ironic they mentioned it, because linoleic acid (LA), the primary fat found in polyunsaturated fats, including vegetable/seed oils, is linked to melanoma.

In a 1987 study,[12] samples of fat tissue were taken from 100 melanoma patients and 100 people without melanoma and analyzed for fatty acids. Not only is there an increase in linoleic acid in the tissue of all the subjects, but the percentage of polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFAs) is significantly higher in the melanoma patients' tissue.

"The suggestion is made that increased consumption of dietary polyunsaturates may have a contributory effect in the etiology of melanoma," the researchers concluded.[13] Further, high LA intake can raise your risk for sunburn, which you don't want, as that's what contributes to skin cancer.

Eliminating seed oils from your diet will dramatically reduce your risk of sunburn and skin cancer, as susceptibility to UV radiation damage is controlled by the level of PUFAs in your diet. It's almost like a dial. The PUFAs control how rapidly your skin burns, and how rapidly you develop skin cancer. According to Saladino:[14]

"Is it possible that increased linoleic acid consumption could be causing fragility to cell membranes and that could be leading to oxidative damage in the sun leading to DNA damage and then more melanocytic nevi precursor lesions or melanoma or could the same thing be happening with squamous and basal?

I would say yes. It's not supported by literature yet because there haven't been any studies looking at this. We need many more studies with linoleic acid ... I have major concerns that linoleic acid found in seed oils is one of the biggest drivers of chronic disease in humans."

Nonburning Sun Exposure 'Is a Health Benefit'

The health risks of sun exposure come from getting burned, i.e., overexposure. "Since 'over exposure' is not defined, the public is led to believe that sun exposure should be avoided and that avoidance of sun exposure is risk-free," researchers with Medical University of South Carolina and Leiden University Medical Center in The Netherlands wrote in 2018.[15]

In fact, there's a vast array of benefits from sunshine, which you miss out on if you don't get enough. This goes far beyond vitamin D, which likely serves as a marker of sun exposure but isn't solely responsible for all of its benefits. A commentary in the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health explained:[16]

> *"Identified mediators produced by sun exposure include vitamin D, nitric oxide, dopamine, beta-endorphin, urocanic acid, and glutamate. Vitamin D supplementation is not an adequate substitute for sun exposure ... Our conclusion is that non-burning UV exposure is a health benefit and — in moderation — should be recommended as such."*

For instance, sun exposure increases circulating nitric oxide, which lowers risks of high blood pressure and cardiovascular diseases.[17] Health risks associated with low sun exposure, meanwhile, include:[18]

Specific cancers	Multiple sclerosis
Diabetes	Cardiovascular disease
Autism	Alzheimer's disease
Age-related macular degeneration	

Also, if you get proper sun exposure, near-infrared rays from the sun penetrate deep into your body and activate cytochrome c oxidase, which in turn stimulates the production of melatonin inside your mitochondria. Your mitochondria produce ATP, the energy

currency of your body. A byproduct of this ATP production is reactive oxidative species (ROS), which are responsible for oxidative stress.

Excessive amounts of ROS will damage the mitochondria, contributing to suboptimal health, inflammation and chronic health conditions such as diabetes, obesity and thrombosis (blood clots). But melatonin essentially mops up ROS that damage your mitochondria.

So by getting plenty of sun exposure during the day, your mitochondria will be bathed in melatonin, thereby reducing oxidative stress.[19,20] Exposure to narrow bank ultraviolet B, or NB-UVB, even leads to another little-known benefit — modulation of the human intestinal microbiome.[21]

Recommendations for Safe, Sensible Sun Exposure

To gain the benefits of sunlight while minimizing the risks, you should spend short amounts of time in the sun daily, gradually working your way up so you don't get burned. Saladino refers to this as building your solar callus:[22]

> *"If you are light skin, cover up, get a small amount of sun exposure, develop your solar callus ... get that UVA and UVB into the different layers of your skin. Get that UVB-producing melanin gradually dark and gradually think about being in the sun.*
>
> *As a piece of homework that is my prescription for you, get into the sun gradually ... this is your chance to fill up your sun reserves ... If you're going to be out in the sun too long to safely be in the sun without burning based on your relative amount of melanin in your skin, then cover yourself."*

Meanwhile, remember to reduce LA in your diet by avoiding ultraprocessed foods, and build up your body's supply of nutrients, like astaxanthin, that have **UV protective activity**, helping to reduce your risk of sunburn and related skin damage from the inside out.

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