

Sunscreen alone not enough to prevent skin cancer

By Erin Beresini, Outside

In an 83-page call to action released last week, the Surgeon General declared war on skin cancer. Rates are on the rise faster than those of any other cancer, he says, though he doesn't know exactly why. One thing is for certain: to avoid becoming one of his scary stats, you can't rely on sunscreen.

Stanford University dermatologists found that people who relied solely on sunscreens for protection burned more than people who didn't wear much sunscreen, but sought out shade, and wore a hat and long sleeves to guard against skin damage. As the Environmental Working Group, a non-profit environmental research organization based in Washington D.C., explains, scientists have conflicting opinions on whether or not sunscreen can help prevent melanoma.

Part of the problem is that sunscreens, especially in the U.S., do not protect equally against UVA and UVB rays. UVB rays cause sunburns, but UVA rays, which penetrate deeper into the skin can be equally damaging without leaving an obvious mark.

Currently in the U.S., many sunscreens may claim broad-spectrum protection without truly guarding users against both UVA and UVB rays. "The widespread marketing of sunscreens with SPF values of 50 to 100 means that consumers are increasingly (and unknowingly) selecting products with less proportional UVA protection," EWG writes. "Newer, modern UVA-filtering ingredients developed for European sunscreens could remedy this problem."

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