



UV Index and Sun Safety

Spending time outdoors can be great for your health and well-being, but protecting your skin from the sun's harmful ultraviolet (UV) rays is important. One of the most effective ways to do this is by understanding and using the UV index, a daily forecast that measures the strength of the sun's UV radiation. Whether your job requires you to spend time outside, or you're heading out for a walk, playing a round of golf or simply running errands, knowing the UV index can help you time your exposure and take steps to protect yourself from sun damage.

This article explains what the UV index is, how to interpret it, and how to use it to make smart choices to protect your skin all year.

What Is the UV Index?

The UV index is a scale developed by the National Weather Service and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to indicate the level of solar UV radiation expected at a particular place and time. UV radiation is the part of sunlight that can damage your skin and eyes and, over time, increase your risk of skin cancer.

The higher the UV index value, the greater the potential for harm from unprotected sun exposure. The index is reported on a scale from 0 to 11+, with each range corresponding to the average person's risk level.

Understanding UV Index Levels

Here's a breakdown of the UV index's levels and what precautions you should take, according to the EPA:

- **Low (0 to 2)**—There is minimal risk of harm from UV exposure. It is safe for most people to be outdoors, but sunglasses are still a good idea, depending on the time of day.
- **Moderate (3 to 5)**—There is some risk of harm from unprotected exposure. Seek shade during midday hours and use sunscreen.

- **High (6 to 7)**—There is a higher risk. Reduce time in the sun between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. and wear protective clothing, sunglasses and sunscreen.
- **Very high (8 to 10)**—This is a very strong risk. Take extra precautions, such as limiting sun exposure during peak hours, wearing a wide-brimmed hat and reapplying sunscreen frequently.
- **Extreme (11+)**—At this extreme level, there is maximum risk of harm. Try to avoid sun exposure altogether and take full sun protection measures.

Accessing the UV Index

Knowing the UV index is only helpful if you can find it easily, and thankfully, it's widely available through many everyday tools. Here are some of the most convenient ways to access the UV index:

- **Weather apps**—Most smartphone weather apps include the UV index in the daily forecast.
- **Websites**—The EPA, National Weather Service and major weather sites display the UV index by location.
- **Smart devices**—Many smartwatches and fitness trackers provide real-time UV data, especially during outdoor activities.
- **Local news and radio**—Morning weather reports on TV or radio often include the day's UV level, especially during the summer months.
- **Voice assistants**—You can ask smart home devices like Alexa, Siri or Google Assistant for the current UV index.

Using the UV Index to Make Informed Choices

Children, older adults, and people with fair skin or certain medical conditions may be especially vulnerable to high UV levels. Even on cloudy days, up to 80% of UV rays can penetrate cloud cover, so protection is important no matter the weather.

The UV index is a helpful tool that can guide your daily decisions and keep you protected from harmful UV radiation. Here's how to use the UV index proactively:

- **Check the index in the morning.** Many weather apps and websites display the UV index alongside the daily forecast.
- **Adjust your schedule when possible.** If the UV Index is high (6 or above), plan outdoor activities for early morning or late afternoon, when the sun's rays are less intense. When rescheduling is not feasible, take extra precautions to protect yourself from UV exposure.
- **Take extra precautions when the index spikes.** On days with a very high or extreme rating, minimize direct exposure and prepare accordingly with strong sun protection.
- **Watch for environmental amplifiers.** Snow, sand, water and even pavement can reflect UV rays and increase your exposure.

Everyday Sun Safety Checklist

Use this checklist when the UV index indicates the need for sun safety:

- **Apply sunscreen (SPF 30+).** Set a reminder on your phone to reapply sunscreen if you're outside for extended periods.
- **Wear sunglasses.** Choose a pair that blocks 100% of UVA and UVB rays to help prevent eye damage and reduce the risk of cataracts over time.
- **Use a wide-brimmed hat.** A brim of at least 3 inches can shade your face, ears and the back of your neck. These are areas that are often exposed and easy to forget.
- **Cover exposed skin.** Look for clothing with a UPF (ultraviolet protection factor) rating for built-in sun defense.
- **Stay in the shade during midday hours.** Take breaks under trees, awnings or umbrellas to limit direct exposure.
- **Check the time.** Try to limit outdoor exposure between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. when the index is high.

Sun protection is most effective when it's consistent. Keep sunscreen and protective gear accessible—in your bag, car or desk drawer—to make it easy to stay safe wherever your day takes you.

Stay Sun Safe Year-Round

UV rays can cause skin damage even on cloudy days or in cooler weather. The UV index is a simple, reliable tool that helps you know when to take extra precautions. By making it part of your daily routine, you can reduce your risk of sunburn, premature aging and skin cancer while still enjoying time outdoors. Practicing daily sun safety, guided by the UV index, helps protect your skin for the long term.

For more information about sun safety or how to protect your skin, speak with your doctor or a qualified health professional.