

Sun Protection Is Important At Every Age

Skin cancers are the most commonly diagnosed of all cancers and one of the most common sun-related disorders. Unfortunately, one myth has permeated our understanding of how this disease begins. Based on a research paper published in 1986, the myth is that we receive 80% of our lifetime ultraviolet radiation (UV) dose by the age of 18. This is completely incorrect.

The myth was based on a complex mathematical model that predicted diligent sunscreen use during the first 18 years of life could reduce the lifetime incidence of non-melanoma skin cancers by 78%. Unfortunately, many people assumed this meant individuals must get almost 80% of their UV exposure during their first 18 years. This “fact” has been widely stated in the mass media for many years. Wrong!

Dianne Godar from the Food and Drug Administration was the lead author of the 1986 paper. In 2003, in an effort to help correct the widely quoted misunderstanding of her group’s original work, she and several associates wrote another paper. This later paper reported that people actually get about one-quarter of their lifetime UV dose every 20 years. Specifically, their paper stated that “Individuals only get about 23% of their lifetime UV dose by the age of 18. They get about 46% by the age of 40, and 74% by the age of 59, [then 100%] assuming they live up to the age of 78.”¹

In this second paper, Godar and colleagues also found that women get lower lifetime UV doses than men and women get fairly consistent doses of UV throughout their lives. In contrast, men over the age of 40 actually increase their outdoor activities and their exposure to UV (particularly those living in the Southwest).

So sun protection really is important at every age. You should always be sunAWARE—and protect yourself no matter what your age.

1. Godar, D.E., Urbach, F., Gasparro F.P., and van der Leun, J.C. “UV Doses of Young Adults.” *Photochemistry and Photobiology*, 2003, 77 (4): 453–57.