



Sunlight

By Wendy Marks
August 2017

Those of you who come to see me in my office versus a phone consultation know that come Summer I am brown as a berry. The comments I get are of two schools: either "You look wonderful and tan", or "Aren't you worried about skin cancer?" Well yes, actually, I am worried about skin cancer. When I was a child in New York I spent a great deal of time slathering myself with baby oil and iodine and baking at the beach in order to create a beautiful tanned look. I know that I have done high-risk behaviors and exposed myself to an unhealthy amount of sun during my youth. In fact, one year it was all the rage to write your boyfriend's name in lipstick on your back or leg, sprinkle sand over it to prevent it from tanning, so that you had a sort of temporary tattoo memorializing your special friend. Also, because of my skin type, I have burned many times, which has increased my risk significantly. I think it is pretty likely that in the course of my lifetime I may develop some form of skin cancer. That is why I go every year to my dermatologist, strip naked, and have my body looked over with bright light and a magnifying glass. I am not advocating total sun decadence.

Having said all that, why am I tan? Well, the short answer is that I am a swimmer. Unless you really like swimming at night (and the accompanying bugs), it's pretty hard not to get a tan, even if you put on a decent SPF sunscreen that is rated for swimmers (which I do). I had a long conversation with my dermatologist, a very wise woman. In her opinion, the benefit of swimming, both physically and psychologically, is probably greater than the risk of skin cancer. She stressed that I need to see her every year in order to catch anything that might be developing, but encouraged me to enjoy my much-needed exercise and recreation. No, that doesn't mean sitting out in the sun for hours uncovered; I cover up as soon as I get out of the pool.

The point of this article is that there are real benefits to sun exposure, which is not to say don't use sunblock - especially if you have a history of skin cancer, or lots of folks in your family who do. In a prior article, I wrote about different types of suntan lotions, sunscreens and their efficacy. Please check the Environmental Working Group web site at www.ewg.org for good and safe sunblocks, as many sunblocks are ineffective or have harmful chemicals. EWG also explains SPF and its real meaning.



The Benefits of Sunlight

Ok, so all disclaimers assumed...Let's look at some benefits, both short- and long-term, that moderate (let's say 15 minutes a day) winter and summer full sun exposure may bring.

Most of us have heard about vitamin D and how important it is to our health, both mental and physical. Many of us take supplemental vitamin D, especially in latitudes where there is little sun for a large percentage of the year. That 15 minutes a day is often enough for our bodies to make the vitamin D we need.

Vitamin D, essential for bone health, also has potential anti-cancer and immune system benefits. There is even some good indication that vitamin D has antioxidant effects and may moderate the aging of our brain, something I think about more and more as the years add up. There is evidence that sun exposure may help with different types of cancer, possibly even supporting remission in breast and lung cancer. Research on this is in very early stages but it does appear to be a promising line of inquiry.

We all know that hanging our blankets out makes them smell better and somehow feel fresher and healthier. Sunlight does in fact help kill bacteria, mold and mildew. When I worked in geriatric care we often used broad-spectrum light near a person's body for 20 minutes three times a day to successfully cure resistant bedsores. And many folks that suffer with psoriasis use light treatment to help send a bad outbreak into remission. Other skin

issues, including eczema, fungal infection, and even acne respond well to sunlight exposure.

Anecdotally, the sun has a calming effect. I know that if I go out and lie in the sun for half an hour with a good book I will feel calmer and less stressed. This is in part due to the fact that the sun and sweating help detox your body. White blood cells increase with sun exposure, which can help your ability to fight off infection, supporting my mother's practice of sending us out to get some sunshine when we had a cold or a mild fever. I remember thinking as a kid that this wasn't a very good idea and I'd rather stay in bed, but I did feel better as long as I was not doing strenuous activity.

The sun also elevates mood. For many years I used a lightbox, a lamp with strong, balanced spectrum light. Working in an office that had no natural sunlight, it was something I had to do in order to keep from feeling very depressed as the winter went on. Now I'm lucky enough to work in an office that has sun exposure most of the year, so the lightbox, now pretty much an antique, sits unused on my desk, except when there is a period of rain and snow for a week. Then I use it and find that my mood is indeed improved. SAD, or Seasonal Affective Disorder, has become recognized by the therapeutic community over the past couple of decades. When I was in Norway I saw how seasonal lack of light can make people very blue. I wondered how, in a country where not everyone was rich, most people seemed to take a vacation in a warm climate during the winter. I was told that it was the only way they could make it through the long winters, emotionally. They had found a way to counteract the lack of sunlight (for over nine months of the year, in their case) and treat their Seasonal Affective Disorder in a way that included some fun.

Of course, overdoing anything is a bad idea. Sun exposure should be built up gradually, and sunburn is never a good thing. It's also important that if you are taking prescription medications, especially those for blood pressure or depression, you should discuss with your doctor the possibility of sun reactivity. Even herbal medications such as St. John's wort for depression can make you more reactive to sunlight, so be careful to check this out before embarking on a regular sun exposure program.

Whatever you do, enjoy this wonderful season we call Summer.

Namaste,

Wendy Marks