BASIC INFORMATION

WHAT IS SUNBURN?

• An injury to the skin resulting from prolonged or intense sun exposure, without protection, causing redness and sometimes blisters on the affected skin area
• Most sunburns affect the outer layer of the skin causing a first-degree or second-degree burn
• Sunburn can affect any area of the body

WHAT ARE COMMON SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS?

• Red or pink skin that feels hot to the touch
• Pain or tenderness (usually worse in the first 6 to 48 hours)
• Itching
• Blisters
• Swelling
• Skin may peel
• Fever, nausea, headache, and faintness (when the sunburn is spread over a large area of skin)

WHAT CAUSES SUNBURN?

• Overexposure to the sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays
• The melanin (a pigment in the skin that protects the skin from the sun) cannot maintain its natural level of protection, causing the skin to burn
  • A suntan is the body's natural way of blocking the UV rays in order to prevent sunburn
  • The amount of melanin in the skin is genetic, and some people don't produce enough to protect the skin well

WHAT INCREASES MY RISK?

• Fair skin, light eye color, red or blonde hair
• Sunny or warm climates
• High-altitude
• Occupations that expose you to the sun (such as gardeners or farmers)
• Sunbathing or outdoor swimming
• A history of previous sunburns
• Alcohol consumption while engaged in outdoor activities
• Taking medications that can increase your photosensitivity

WHAT ARE POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS?

• Frequent sunburns may cause your skin to
  • Show signs of premature aging
  • Become thickened
  • Discolor or form dark spots
  • Become dry, leathery, and wrinkled
• Severe sunburns significantly increase your risk of developing skin cancer
• Blisters may form and become infected
• In severe cases, dehydration or heat stroke may occur
• Eye damage

WHAT CAN I EXPECT?
• Sunburn can usually be self-managed at home with over-the-counter products
• Recovery time is usually within 3 days up to 3 weeks
• Affected skin may peel or shed
  • This usually begins 3-8 days after exposure

HOW DO I REDUCE MY RISK?
• Stay out of the sun between the hours of 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. (when the sun's rays are the strongest)
• Use sunscreen daily with a sun protective factor (SPF) of 15 or greater (even during cloudy days)
• If spending extended time outdoors, reapply sunscreen per product instructions or at least every 3 hours, especially when swimming
• When you go outside, wear wide-brimmed hats and sunglasses that filter UV light and clothes that cover large areas of skin
• In infants and children
  • Babies under six months of age should never be exposed to the sun
  • Babies older than six months should be protected from the sun, wear UV-blocking sunglasses to protect their eyes
  • Children should follow the same protections as adults
WHAT GENERAL MEASURES SHOULD I TAKE?

- Your healthcare provider may perform a physical examination of the affected skin area and ask questions about your symptoms and sun-exposure
- Self-Care
  - Cool down as soon as possible, cover up and get out of the sun
  - Apply a cold compress to the affected skin area
  - Take a shower or cool bath
    - If bathing, you can sprinkle the water with a topical emollient or baking soda before bathing
  - Apply aloe vera lotion or hydrocortisone cream to the affected skin area while skin is still damp
- Activity
  - Rest until your symptoms improve
  - Ensure burned area does not get re-exposed to sunlight while healing
- Diet
  - Drink plenty of fluids and remain properly hydrated
- Helpful Links
  - To learn more: Skin Cancer Foundation
    - Website: www.skincancer.org
  - To learn more: American Academy of Dermatology
    - Website: www.aad.org

WHAT ARE COMMON LABS AND TESTS?

- Your doctor may perform a physical skin examination of the affected area to determine the severity of the burn
- Tests to determine abnormal sunburn reaction (photo testing) may be necessary if you experience sunburns after minor exposures to sunlight

WHAT ARE MY TREATMENT OPTIONS?

- Once sunburn occurs, get out of the sun
- Infants under one year, treat sunburn as an emergency and contact their doctor
- Apply cool wet compresses or take a cool bath or shower
- Aloe vera lotions may help reduce pain, swelling, and peeling of the affected skin area
- Over-the-counter pain medication or creams may help reduce your symptoms
  - Ibuprofen, aspirin or acetaminophen
  - Hydrocortisone cream (0.5%-1%)
  - Sunburn treatment lotions
- Prescription medications if the burn is severe
- If blisters form
  - Cover lightly with gauze to prevent infection
  - Try not to break the blisters
  - If blisters break, gently clean that area with mild soap and water

WHAT MEDICATIONS MAY BE PRESCRIBED?

- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medications
- Pain relief medications or cortisone
- Topical aloe vera gels are sometimes recommended

WHAT CAUTIONS SHOULD I TAKE?

- Make sure to drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration
- Keep skin moisturized
- Try not to break blisters
- Protect your sunburn from further sun exposure

WHEN SHOULD I SEEK MEDICAL HELP?

- Infants under one year, treat sunburn as an emergency and contact their doctor
- Infants and children over one year, contact their doctor if
  - Blistering
  - Lethargy
• Fever over 101°F (38.3°C)
• Severe pain
• Signs of dehydration such as infrequent urination
• Seek medical advice if you have the following symptoms
  • High fever
  • Fluid-filled blisters covering a large portion of your body
  • Sunburn that is severe and covers more than 15% of your body
  • Severe pain that persists longer than 48 hours
  • Headache, confusion, nausea or chills
  • Signs of an infection from blister(s)
REFERENCES

- Image of the 3 Degrees of Burns courtesy of K. Aainsqatsi. [CC BY-SA 3.0]. Available at http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/93/Burn_Degree_Diagram.svg

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