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Being Sun-Smart Can Drive You Nuts

When I was a kid, I spent summers playing outside with my friends. The only “Sun Block” we worried about was the occasional cloud; by the end of summer my pale skin had turned golden brown. Meanwhile, our moms would sunbathe, chatting while they watched their figure flaws disappear under the camouflage of healthy-looking tans.

Boy, were we stupid!

Now we know the truth: tanning can give you skin cancer, age spots, and a face with more lines than Shakespeare’s “Hamlet.” These days, an informed person like me wouldn’t think of going out in the sun without wearing Sun Block that’s stronger than a baseball player on steroids.

But in my youth, ignorance was bliss. We didn’t have to mess around with sticky creams, lotions, sprays and sticks; all we knew was that a tan made you look great. Besides, getting tan was easy! Forget “no pain, no gain.” This self-improvement project was as simple as lying on a beach towel, taking a nap. No, we weren’t being lazy. We were working on our tans!

What a bummer to find out the sun is actually a giant weapon, shooting us with scary-sounding “broad spectrum rays.” Now we can’t go out in the sun (and we definitely can’t let our kids out in the sun) without slathering on Sun Block with a very high SPF (Skin Paleness Factor).

“Can we go outside?” my daughter, Kelly, asks every day during the summer. I trudge over to the drawer crammed with bottles of Sun Block and yank it open. I watch the bottles rattle around, then stop to display assorted numbers like ping pong balls in the weekly Lotto drawing. This is where I get confused. I stare at the numbers and wonder, should I pick a 15? Or a 25? Do I need a 40? And if I run out of 40, can I use a 25 PLUS a 15?

Eventually I make my choice, and begin the task of coating my entire body. It’s a big job (which is getting bigger all the time). But as a parent, this is nothing compared to the dreaded adventure ahead; I have to put sunscreen on my child. I call this process “catch and release.”

If you’ve never done it before, here’s how it works: first, you must lure the child toward you (as bait, I recommend candy or dollar bills). Once the child has been captured, work quickly; your prey will try to escape by thrashing wildly and flapping its limbs. Grasp the child tightly with one hand (the restraining hand), while the other hand (the Houdini hand) repeatedly squirts lotion from the bottle onto itself and evenly coats the child’s entire body,

carefully avoiding the eyes. As the subject becomes slippery, the challenge escalates as you strain to keep the child from wriggling away.

Exhausted, I finally finish. Sometimes it's too late; the sun has already set.

It doesn't matter. Whether or not I make it out into the sun, when I look in the mirror the person staring back resembles the Pillsbury Doughboy. This is the new healthy look, I tell myself, and I'm being smart. I study my pasty white skin, my figure flaws that stick out without hope of camouflage.

Sometimes I wish I could be stupid again.