

My wife and I are both African American and enjoy going to the beach. Do we need sunscreen for our dark skin?

“No one is immune to skin cancer,” says Sunaina Likhari, M.D., F.A.A.D. “Just because the majority of people diagnosed with melanoma are light-skinned does not mean that melanoma cannot affect people of color, too. When melanoma does occur, it can be more deadly because it’s harder to detect and is usually in an advanced stage once it is detected.”

The American Academy of Dermatology recommends that people of color use a broad-spectrum sunscreen having an SPF of at least 30 and look for ingredients that block harmful ultraviolet rays, such as zinc oxide. “When you re-enter the pool or ocean, always reapply your sunscreen,” says Dr. Likhari.



“Sunscreens are important, but you shouldn’t totally rely on them,” adds Dr. Likhari. “While they do protect against sunburn, they don’t necessarily prevent cancer. If you use sunscreens to spend more time in the sun, your skin could collect about the same amount of exposure to harmful UV rays. Stay out of the midday sun as much as possible and protect yourself with a wide-brim hat and a long-sleeved shirt.”

“Besides sunscreen, people of color should perform self-exams to look for changes in moles and other skin irregularities and report changes to their primary care doctor or dermatologist,” adds Dr. Likhari. “Pay special attention to the palms of the hands, soles of the feet, the fingernails, toenails, mouth, groin, and buttocks. Look for any spots or lesions that are changing, itching, or bleeding, or any ulcers or wounds that won’t heal.”