



May 30, 2015 – Grand Rapids, MI

The Truth About Sunscreen!

In today's message, I'm going to examine the science behind the article on sunscreen that started this week's look at reposting websites. There are three primary research findings used in the article that are supposed to blow the lid off the myth of sunscreen preventing cancer. Let's take a look.

“Avoiding the sun doubles all-cause mortality”

This research finding is taken from an epidemiological study done at Sweden's Karolinska Institute titled the Melanoma in Southern Sweden Study or MISS (1). The data does show that over 20 years in a group of close to 30,000 women, twice as many women with the lowest exposure to sun died from all causes versus those who were exposed to the highest amount of sun. The percentages were 3% versus 1.5%. The reposting website took that to mean that it was a lack of vitamin D that was responsible for the increase.

Let's do some math. The number of women who died from all causes over 20 years was 2,545. That works out to 127 deaths per year; 1.5% would be roughly two women per year and 3% would be four women. That means that two more women died per year from all causes. That could have due to accidents or alcoholism and had nothing to do with vitamin D. Or maybe they weren't out in the sun because they were extremely sedentary and thus in poorer health than those who went outside and did something. Remember, epidemiological data in no way suggests cause and effect, it just states the facts. All we know is they died. Period.

“Ground-breaking study...”

The article stated that “optimal blood levels of vitamin D offer protection against sunburn and skin cancer” and they gave a reference from a specific journal (2). The only problem was that the article didn't say that at all. The article didn't even look at blood levels; it actually examined vitamin D3 applied to the skin of hairless mice after exposure to UV radiation. (FYI: it does help, so keep that in mind if your hairless mice get a severe sunburn.) But the reference is meaningless in the way it was cited in the article.



“Higher rates of melanoma in sunscreen users”

The article quotes a 2000 study that suggests that people who use sunscreen have higher rates of melanoma. There were a few details that the writers left out or removed. This was another study in Sweden, this one on patients who were diagnosed with melanoma and compared with a group of healthy controls (3). Those who used sunscreen spent more time in the sun than those who did not. But more important, the average SPF of the sunscreen used was 6, with most using 2 SPF. The subjects were recruited between 1995 and 1997, before the minimal SPF was determined to be 15. Again it's intentionally misleading; in reality, the people with melanoma spent more time in the sun with virtually no skin protection.

The Bottom Line

There are several more issues I could talk about, but it won't make any difference: the article is plain bupkis. I spent the time writing about reposting websites this week so you can identify what may be real and what may not. Maybe you learned enough to assess bogus health information yourself. Here's one more clue: if it takes more than two clicks to get the whole article, clicks are the website's real goal, not your health.

It all comes down to two things: if something sounds too good or too bad to be true, it often is. In some cases, it's all about the money—the money people make when you click on those links. And second, wear your sunscreen.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

References:

1. J Intern Med. 2014 Jul;276(1):77-86.
2. Cancer Prev Res (Phila). 2011 Sep;4(9):1485-94.
3. Int. J. Cancer 87:145–150, 2000.

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