



Sunscreens: Keep Out or Cover Up

by Janey Lee Grace

I think the sun has become such an 'emotive' topic in recent years. Everywhere you turn we are being told to wear protective moisturisers with sun factor 15 all through the winter months, mothers who send their children to school or on any kind of organised outing without a tube of sunblock are seen as pariahs. Yet sunbeds have never been more popular and tanning centres are popping up everywhere offering us quick tan sessions or spray on fake tans.

There's no doubt most of us like a suntanned look, somehow that bronzed beach babe looks healthier than that pale and interesting figure huddled in the shade. Personally I think its time to go back to basics again. Let's go back in time to when the sun was not 'the enemy' Heliotherapy was the order of the day and the sun was 'worshipped' for its healing properties and the incredible beneficial effects of vitamin D – essential for our immune system and increasing our oxygen levels and for a feeling of wellbeing, not to mention strong teeth and bones. Even some unprotected exposure to the sun may be good for us as you'll find documented in Richard Hobday's book 'The Healing Power of the Sun'

Now before you swing from the rafters with disgust and try and suggest that I am wholly irresponsible telling mad dogs and Englishmen to go back out into the midday sun, let's remember that time has moved on and we have a different environment now – literally. None of us know for certain the real state of the ozone

layer but we do know that even in April or May an unexpected heatwave can result in some very burnt and sore skin.

It's the word 'burn' added to sun that changes everything, if your skin is naturally dark you probably find you can be out and about in even quite strong sunshine and you aren't affected. Paler skins like mine though have to be extremely careful. I'm also covered in moles so I realise I'm prime target for malignant melanoma. I wouldn't for one minute be so daft as to suggest that anyone should go and lie flat out to 'sunbathe' for hours at a time unprotected in hot sunshine for the sake of a 'tan', but by the same token I don't buy into this idea that it's all alright if we slap on lots of high factor sunscreen and reapply often.

Sunscreens can claim to block over 90 per cent of the sun's harmful rays, the synthetic chemical types absorb UV rays (allegedly) and the 'barrier' types disperse the sun's rays.

So what should we do? Well keep moving – be active – not static. Wherever possible if you know your skin is likely to burn cover up.

Lets start with the kids, I've no idea why its so hard in this country to buy long sleeved lightweight tops for kids, it seems to be either T shirts with short sleeves or sweat shirt style tops with long sleeves that are too heavy for a warm summers day but if you know you're headed for the beach get into 'protective clothing'. I have used www.suntogs.co.uk in the past. For yourself go for the film star image. I manage it (in my dreams) with a huge sunhat, big sunglasses – fortunately very trendy and big sarongs and pashminas. Even parasols have become trendy again and I've been seen on occasions walking along Oxford St with a 'Steve Wright in the Afternoon umbrella' when its 80 degrees in the shade – Ok so I look barking but I'm determined not to get burnt and I'm imperfectly disorganised so I forgot my designer parasol!

But what's up with sunscreen I hear you say – surely if I'm protecting myself with high SPF factors I can stay out for longer ? Well there's still confusion over UVA and UVB protection. They need to come in equal measures ideally but most sunscreens only contain UVB so a sun factor 50 rating may mean you have nearly an hour in the sun but you could have been unprotected from the UVB. An article in The Daily Mail by Claire Coleman – 'Your Guide to a Tantastic Summer' put it very simply....

'UV radiation is principally made up of two different types of rays: UVA which are less likely to cause sunburn but penetrate the skin more deeply and are thought to be responsible for the wrinkles and

leathery skin that typify sun-related, as well as certain types of skin cancer including melanoma. And UVB which gives you sunburn and is thought to cause some types of skin cancer.

An easy way to remember which rays do what is to think of A for ageing and B for burning.'

Of course the powers that be would have us believe that so long as we use a high factor good quality sunscreen with UVA and UVB protection and we reapply it often and throw it away after a couple of months we should be just fine. We're allegedly 'fine' with all the creams and cosmetics we're encouraged to buy too in the name of anti-ageing and being beautiful! I don't want to write that list of scary chemicals again – I just want you to know that several of the 'imperfectly natural people' featured in my book, when asked about sunscreen give the answer – 'cancer in a bottle – no thanks!!' I must stress yet again I am not saying that purely by using sunscreen you will have an increased risk of cancer or any other illness for that matter, but I do believe the accumulative effect of all the various different creams, lotions, potions, sprays, aerosols and cosmetics we use on a daily basis will add up to a veritable cocktail of potentially harmful synthetic toxic chemicals which quite frankly I'd rather avoid if there's an alternative.

So in an ideal world, cover up first, but for the bits that will be exposed or if you know that you're going to be swimming or on a boat trip and with the best will in the world neither clothes or sitting in the shade are appropriate, then you'll need some form of protection, probably sunblock.

Fortunately things are definitely moving on. The best option being to do as the surfers do and use zinc oxide as a total sunblock without the addition of too many scary chemicals but I know realistically most of us don't want to walk about with bright white noses!

There are now sunscreens available with natural zinc oxide in transparent form. So it will protect you but will be invisible. The 'Caribbean Blue' range has a Baby Sunshield SPF 15 100 per cent natural sunblock.

There are now also some great natural sun lotions available in health food stores that are free from the worst of the bunch of synthetic chemicals. You'll need to check which ones work for you because even plant and mineral based products can cause an allergic reaction in some people. I use the green people SPF 25 and

for my children I buy in bulk the Green People Organic Sunblock for children. Other excellent brands are Dr Hauschka and Urtekram.

Faking It

If you really do love that bronzed look though, what's to do then?

Let's go old style first and fake a tan using strong black tea. It worked Ok for those glamorous girls in wartime when a cup of tea doubled as stockings too with brown eyeliner to draw a seam down the back of the leg!!

Make a cup of strong black tea sponge over areas you want to be tanned. You can build up the colour by reapplying – obviously that ones not ideal for swimming.

Regular fake tanning lotions are thought to be relatively harmless as they mostly use DHA as the active ingredient. (dihydroxyacetone to be precise) and that's regarded as safe. But still I can't even stand the smell of most brands and I'd rather find one from a company who've put a bit more thought into it all. You can buy an excellent natural fake tanning lotion from Green People containing far less synthetic chemicals.

Sunburn treatments

OK so we're imperfect and there'll be occasions where we'll be caught out without protection – the trick is to act quickly to avoid burnt skin.

Lavender essential oil (sold in all health stores) is fantastic for burns – just put it on neat. I have a friend whose husband burnt his arm badly while cooking a barbecue – (the flame came out and attacked him) and as the skin started to peel off we liberally applied lavender oil and watched it "heal" in front of our eyes. What would have been a very serious burn and probably left a scar was healed within hours and after the initial stinging when the oil went on the pain subsided really quickly. Obviously sunburn won't be as dramatic as that but keep lavender oil to hand never the less.

If you've got an Aloe Vera plant slice it open and use the gel to apply to sunburn, do it regularly. You can of course also buy Aloe Vera gel in health stores and keep it in the fridge!

Cucumber Toner – Just slice lengthways and rub over burnt sections.

Apple cider vinegar - Add 1 cup of apple cider to 2 cups of cold water and spray on the skin regularly to take the sting out.

Health stores often sell a range of synthetic chemical free after sun lotions too and of course coconut oil is very soothing.

Janey Lee Grace is author of 'Imperfectly Natural Woman – getting life right the natural way' and the new book 'Imperfectly Natural Baby and Toddler – how to be a green parent in today's busy world' is out now Orion books. Check out www.imperfectlynatural.com