



Suncare

Most people with vitiligo need to take extra care of their skin in warmer weather because they are **particularly vulnerable to sunburn**. This eBooklet aims to help you do this.

How the sun affects vitiligo

People with vitiligo are more vulnerable to sunburn because their white skin patches have **no natural protection** against the sun's rays. 'Normal' skin is protected by melanin (skin pigment); the effect of the sun is to increase melanin production and to turn the skin brown to protect it from burning. This does not happen in vitiligo patches, where melanin is either absent or inactive.

If vitiligo skin is not protected, it is likely to burn quickly. The areas most at risk are those where the skin is thinnest, for example eyelids, nose, neck, the décolletage and the backs of the hands. Not only is sunburn painful, but also it might stimulate the vitiligo to spread in some people. Sunburn also increases the risk of skin cancer.



SHOULD EXPOSURE TO SUN
be avoided
WHENEVER POSSIBLE?

For most people, it is not practical or necessary to avoid sun exposure completely. Also, **we need some sunlight to keep healthy**. It is our main source of Vitamin D. So you should spend short times in the morning or late afternoon outside when the sun is not so strong (no more than twenty minutes). The solution is to take precautions to protect the skin from sun damage. Having vitiligo should not stop you from taking outdoor holidays in warmer climates. However, sunbathing on the beach is generally not the best way to spend your time...

Effective sun protection

Sunblock or sunscreen products

You need to choose a sunblock or sunscreen product that protects you from the ultraviolet light in the sun's rays. There are two types of rays:

- **UVA** are long rays which penetrate deep into the skin and can cause dryness and wrinkles, as well as contributing to burning. On sun protection products, the extent of protection against UVA rays is indicated by stars. **Vitiligo skin requires at least 4 stars UVA protection**

- **UVB** are medium length rays which are mainly absorbed in the upper layers of the skin. They are the main cause of sunburn. On sun protection products, the extent of protection against UVB rays is indicated by the Skin Protection Factor (SPF) number, which ranges from 2 to 50+. **Vitiligo skin requires at least SPF 30**. There is little evidence that SPF's of over 30 provide any additional benefit.

You also need to make sure that your sun protection product is water-resistant or preferably **waterproof** if you are going in water. (Waterproof products give longer protection than water-resistant ones). Remember that sun can penetrate water to a depth of 10 metres.

Some brands of sunblock are classified by the NHS as substances which can be obtained through prescription from your doctor. You are entitled to ask your GP for a prescription for sunscreen if you have vitiligo. The products include a sunblock for lips and a 500ml product that can prove economical if you receive free prescriptions.

Applying sunblock or sunscreen products

The effectiveness of any product depends on it being applied correctly. You need an ounce at least, which is the amount you can hold in the palm of your hand or the amount that would fill a shot glass. The first layer should be applied twenty minutes or more before going out in the sun. You may find it easier to apply your sun protection before dressing, for example around the neckline and arms. You also need to remember to **reapply** your sun protection during the day, approximately once an hour, to make sure that you continue to be protected. Make sure you also use a product on your scalp if you have thinning hair and on your lips. Also check the expiry date of products before applying them. Finally you can keep unused sunscreen for the following year by storing it somewhere cool and dry.

Other measures

To avoid burning it is important not to rely too much on sunblock. Some UV rays will go through any sunscreen. You can also protect your skin by **wearing loose cotton clothes**, such as a long sleeved shirt over a sleeveless tee-shirt, which may be the most comfortable clothing. Particularly if you are visiting a country with a hot and humid climate, look out for suitable local clothing and avoid wearing uncomfortable synthetic fibres and tight tee-shirts.

Wearing a sunhat and sunglasses will also help to prevent sunburn, as well as **keeping in the shade**, especially at the hottest time of day (11am to 3pm). This is particularly important for children, and especially babies, whose skin is so delicate.

Some facts about sunlight to consider (especially when thinking about holidays):

- Snow, sand and water can reflect up to 85% of the sun's rays. Even in the shade, you can be exposed to 50% of the surrounding sunlight through reflection.
- Sunlight gets stronger the nearer you get to the equator.
- Sunlight is also stronger at high altitudes, a point to remember when skiing.
- Sun rays can penetrate quite dense cloud, so it is possible to burn even when you feel cool. A cold wind will not protect you from sunlight either. Be particularly careful in the typical British seaside climate of sun and wind – the coolness of the wind can distract you from the power of the sun.

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