Safe Farm: Remember sun safety in the field

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Remember sun safety in the field

Long days outside in the warm glow of summer can be a serious hazard. In recent years, scientists have found that environmental pollution may deplete the earth’s ozone layer that protects the surface from the sun’s harmful ultraviolet radiation. Researchers also are learning more about the relationship between these invisible sun rays and various forms of skin cancer and diseases such as eye cataracts.

Skin cancer is the most common form of cancer in the United States. The American Cancer Society estimates that annually one million new cases of curable basal cell or squamous cell cancer will be found, but most of these will be treated successfully. They also estimate that in 2002, melanoma, the most dangerous skin cancer, will affect 53,000 people with 7,400 cases resulting in death. The death rate for melanoma has increased about 3 percent per year since 1981. Persons with white skin are 10 times more likely to have it than African Americans, but anyone can get skin cancer, regardless of skin color.

These trends have serious implications for farmers and others who spend much of their working hours outdoors.

Sun exposure
Research has shown that cumulative sun exposure is a major factor in development of skin cancer. Small changes occur in the skin each time it is exposed to sunlight. People who burn easily, rarely tan, freckle or have a fair complexion, have blonde or red hair, or have blue or gray eyes, experience greater skin changes. Skin cancer usually is not associated with a single, painful sunburn, but rather with repeated exposure to the sun and changes in the skin’s makeup. The sun’s rays are more damaging during summer months and at midday hours than other times. However, you can get a sunburn on a cloudy day during other seasons and at other times of the day. Cumulative sun exposure is the major concern.

If you notice a new growth, mole, or discoloration, or a sudden change in an existing mole, see a physician. Early detection of skin cancer is the first step for successful treatment.

The back of the neck, ears, face, and eyes are sensitive to sun exposure. Luckily, these and other body parts easily can be protected by wearing proper clothing, sunglasses, or sunscreen. By taking precautions and avoiding the sun’s most damaging rays, you may be able to reduce your risk.

Hats
Protection for the face and other parts of the head can be as simple as wearing a hat. A classic study by the Wisconsin-based National Farm Medicine Center found no “perfect hat” among 11 styles, however, some are better than others. When selecting a hat, consider the following questions, and balance your needs in each of these areas.

Coverage: How much of your face, ears, and neck are shaded by the hat? Although the baseball cap has been the Midwestern farmer’s trademark, it does not protect vulnerable areas on the ears, temples, face, and neck. Other hats provide better protection, such as wide-brimmed hats, pith helmets, hats with double brims or removable flaps, and

How much do you know?

1. Skin cancer affects more than ___ Americans every year.
   a) 100,000
   b) 1 million
   c) over 1 million

2. A baseball cap will protect you from harmful rays from the sun. True or false?

3. Wearing a hat will keep all the sun’s ultraviolet rays out of your eyes. True or false?

4. All sunglasses protect eyes from the sun’s ultraviolet rays. True or false?

5. You can avoid the sun’s most damaging rays by
   a) avoiding sun from 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.
   b) wearing a wide-brimmed hat.
   c) using sunscreen with protection factor (SPF) of 15 or greater.
   d) wearing long pants and a long-sleeved shirt.
   e) all of the above.

See answers on back.
Commitment: Will you wear it? The most well-designed hat is ineffective if it’s seldom worn. An ISU study found that farmers think it is most important for a hat to be made of sun-blocking material, have a full brim, be lightweight, and low in cost.

Comfort: How does the hat feel? Will it stay on during various tasks? Can you wear it around animals or in close quarters? Does it limit vision or hearing?

Clothing
Clothing helps block the ultraviolet rays (UVR) of the sun when it covers the skin. Wear long-sleeved shirts, long pants, and socks. You probably don’t need special clothes for sun protection if your clothes are washed in detergents with fabric brighteners, because they act as UVR absorbers. Closely woven or knitted fabrics are more protective because they lack open spaces to let UVR through to your skin. Clothes dyed in dark colors (black, navy, red) have more dye to absorb UVR and shield your skin than light colored ones. Light colored and white clothes may be manufactured to block UVR or washed using detergent with brighteners to improve their protection.

Sunscreen lotions
Parts of the body that are not covered by clothes can be protected with sunscreen lotions. Sunscreens are not a substitute for wearing proper clothing. They also can give users a false security.

Sunscreen recommended for outdoor workers should have a sun protection factor (SPF) rating of at least 15. This means that you are protected from a reaction to the sun’s effects 15 times longer than you are without the sunscreen. Read the label to know when to re-apply sunscreen and whether it is water-proof.

Sun avoidance
The easiest way to reduce exposure to ultraviolet radiation is to avoid the sun. Critical times are midday hours between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. This may be impossible for some active individuals, but scheduling tasks around this period could reduce exposure when the sun is most dangerous.

Sunglasses
Even the most effective hats can block only 50 percent of the ultraviolet rays that reach the eyes. A good shade hat combined with the use of sunglasses is a better way to protect eyes from sun exposure.

Use caution when selecting sunglasses because they vary widely in the amount of protection from ultraviolet radiation. A peel-off label on the lens indicates its UV rating, or percentage of ultraviolet rays blocked by the sunglasses (the best rating is 100). If no information is provided by the manufacturer, the sunglasses may not offer any added protection.

Remember that people who spend a lot of time outdoors in work or leisure activities can suffer from more than just exhaustion or heat stress. They are at risk for skin cancer and other diseases that result from years of exposure to the sun. Be aware of the risks and make it a habit to protect yourself from sun exposure.

Prepared by Charles V. Schwab, extension safety specialist; Janis Stone, extension textiles and clothing specialist; and Laura Miller, Safe Farm editor. Design by Valerie King.

For more information
Information about skin cancer is available from:
ISU Extension at http://www.iastate.edu/~tc-ext/protect_clothing.html
University of Iowa at http://tray.dermatology.uiowa.edu/home.html and http://tray.dermatology.uiowa.edu/SafeSun/SafeSun-2.html
American Academy of Dermatology at http://www.aad.org/
American Cancer Society at http://www.cancer.org

ISU Extension at http://www.iastate.edu/~tc-ext/protect_clothing.html
University of Iowa at http://tray.dermatology.uiowa.edu/home.html and http://tray.dermatology.uiowa.edu/SafeSun/SafeSun-2.html
American Academy of Dermatology at http://www.aad.org/
American Cancer Society at http://www.cancer.org
U.S. Center for Disease Control at http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/nscpep/skin.html

Ask your county extension office for:
Is it time to change your hat? Pm-1683
Consumer choices: Shirts and stuff for sun safety, Pm-1862.
How shady is your t-shirt? Pm-1916

Safe Farm
Safe Farm is an Iowa State University Extension project helping to make Iowa farms a safer place to work and live.

Check the World Wide Web at: http://www.ae.iastate.edu/safety.htm for more safety information

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