

Catching a few rays just got riskier

Summertime, and the ozone's disappearing

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Sun worshippers are warned to be less devoted to their summertime rite, because levels of harmful ultraviolet rays are expected to rise four per cent this year, Environment Canada meteorologists say.

That's bad news for people concerned about sunburn, skin cancer, cataracts and other ailments caused by the ABCs of the sun's ultraviolet radiation: UV-A, UV-B and UV-C.

"The ozone layer over the top of our atmosphere has depleted across Canada by four to eight per cent over winter and spring," Environment Canada meteorologist Angus Fergusson said.

"Should we be scared? Well, yeah.

"Every year we have higher levels of cataracts, and total cases of skin cancer have been rising six per cent in recent years."

The condition of the ozone layer is determined through data from monitoring stations across the country and from satellites.

"The UV levels this spring and summer will depend on the weather," Fergusson noted.

"When there are clouds, the indices are low, but if we have a sunny summer like we did last year, the levels of radiation will be greater and the UV index higher."

The predicted rise in UV levels dismays Montreal dermatologist Ari Demirjian.

"Things are getting worse and God knows how much worse they'll get," he said.

"Basically, all the required protective measures will have to be more rigorously applied: Avoid the sun between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., and if you have to work outside, do it in the shade."

Wearing sunscreen is a given, but Demirjian warned against thinking that slathering on lotion is enough to guard against the sun's radiation.

"A hat and sunglasses are a must. There's even some protective clothing that blocks UV-A and UV-B rays. A long-sleeved T-shirt is a good idea, too."



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Veronique Hebert soaks in the warmth at Place des Arts yesterday for her first sunbathing session of the year. The ozone layer over Canada diminished by four to eight per cent in winter and spring, Environment Canada officials warn, which means UV levels are expected to rise by four per cent, increasing health risks. Dermatologists say to wear sunscreen and a hat, and avoid the midday sun.

For someone going to work or school when the UV index is high, one to two applications of sunscreen a day is recommended.

If you're mowing the lawn or gardening for long periods of time, applying sunscreen every three hours is the norm, as sweat, wind and evaporation diminish the product's effects.

"The minimum protection factor is a sunscreen with an SPF of 15," Demirjian said.

"Those on medication who are sensitive to the sun or anyone who has had skin cancer should use a minimum SPF of 30."

The UV index commonly listed in weather forecasts provides a daily account of the expected risk of overexposure to the sun.

It was created by Environment Canada scientists in 1992 and now is used in 40 countries.

"We had been measuring UV radiation for years, and (publishing) the index was a way to make it real to the Canadian public," Fergusson said.

Canadian research on the ozone layer began in the 1930s and gathered momentum in the 1980s when depleted levels and a hole in the ozone layer above Antarctica were first detected.

Environment Canada is calling for above-normal temperatures in central Canada for the April to June period. Near-normal amounts of precipitation are also expected in central Canada.

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