

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SUN

All things in moderation

Inscription from the temple of the sun god Apollo in Delphi

'Let the sun shine' is the refrain to a popular song and a heartfelt wish throughout the unpredictable summer months. There is nothing like cloudless blue skies and the feel of warm sunshine on bare skin to lift our spirits and raise our energy levels. Time and time again, research confirms that despite knowing the risks associated with being in the sun, we enjoy the experience so much that we continue to do it whenever we have the opportunity. Eighty percent of northern Europeans choose their holiday destination primarily for guaranteed sunshine and the majority of us believe that a suntan makes us look and feel healthier and more attractive.

A suntan is the body's natural defence system against sun damage, such as sunburn. Skin colour is determined by melanin, a pigment manufactured by dendritic cells called melanocytes found among the basal cells in the epidermis. The number of melanocytes is the same irrespective of race. Differences in skin colour are due solely to the amount of melanin produced and the nature of the pigment, whether its eumelanin [a brown pigment mainly found in black skin] or pheomelanin [red/yellow pigment predominantly found in light skin]. When skin is exposed to the sun, the melanocytes increase melanin production in reaction to the ultraviolet light in sunlight and transport it to neighbouring cells, where it accumulates above the nuclei. The pigment has the effect of absorbing the UV radiation in sunlight and protects the DNA of the cells from damage. A gradually acquired tan does not only come from the stratum corneum, but from the whole epidermis. As new cells reproduce, the old melanin laden cells are pushed up to the stratum corneum where they are eventually sloughed off after about 28 days. When skin is sunburned it is a sign of cellular damage from ultraviolet radiation. The visible reddening of the skin is caused by dilation of capillaries in the subepidermal connective tissue.

Everyone is in agreement that sunburning is bad news. However, there is no denying that being in the sun makes us feel happier and more relaxed and some psychologists believe that climate and sun exposure may explain, in part, why the temperament and lifestyles of Mediterranean countries are so different from those of northern Europe and also why northern Europeans top the league tables for holidaying away from home. Around 7 out of 10 people in Denmark travel abroad for their holidays, followed closely by the Dutch, Swedes and British with Spain, Greece and the South of France being the top three favourite holiday destinations. Of these holiday makers, one-third will go away a second time and over 10% a third time. In contrast holidaying at home is preferred by the inhabitants of Greece, Spain, Italy, Portugal and France – and why not, as they have sun, sea and scenery in abundance, the three criteria that determine northern European holiday destinations.

One of the reasons the sun makes us feel so good is that it helps generate the hormone serotonin in the brain. Serotonin plays a complex role in the body, helping to maintain a 'happy' feeling and keeping moods under control by helping with sleep patterns, calming anxiety and relieving depression. The lower light levels of the winter season is known to affect as many as one in ten northern Europeans, characterised by depressed moods, decreased energy, a tendency to sleep too much and still feel excessively tired and a craving for sweet foods – particularly chocolate!

Sunlight is also our main source of Vitamin D as very few foods contain Vitamin D in a biologically available form. In northern Europe we only have the right levels of UV radiation during the summer months, when exposure to sunlight usually results in sufficient Vitamin D being stored in our fat cells for use all year round. Vitamin D is needed so bones can absorb calcium and is absolutely essential at helping muscle function and maintaining the immune system.

Far from being the enemy it is sometimes made out to be, many experts believe that the sun is a powerful tool for health and well-being, but one that must be respected. As with all the good things in life, moderation is the key, so 'slop' on some sunscreen, 'slap' on a hat, and 'slip' into the early morning sun for that essential summer feel-good factor.

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About NØRDIC SELFCARE INSTITUTE

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