

## It's gettin' hot in here

Spring break, days at the beach and sunburns are on tap for students next week

By David Barry  
THE BATTALION

As spring break approaches, many students are taking advantage of the recent warm weather to soak up a few rays between classes. Others are visiting tanning parlors.

"This is the busiest time of year," said Allison Gow, an employee of Total Tan Salon in College Station.

But dermatologists have a few words of caution for sun-seeking students - don't get burned.

When sunlight damages cells near the skin, they switch into repair mode, expanding nearby blood vessels to speed the flow of needed nutrients. The increased blood flow causes the red coloration associated with sunburns, said Ron Davis, a clinical professor of dermatology at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School.

But the most serious damage from sunburn is not immediately visible. Sun-damaged skin cells may take years to blossom into melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer. In a 1999 issue of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, a group of doctors reported that the risk of melanoma is associated specifically with exposures that produce sunburn.

The danger of sunburn is greatest for fair-skinned people who spend most of winter indoors, Davis said. Fair skin is especially unguarded against a daylong onslaught of ultraviolet (UV) radiation at the beach because it lacks melanin, pigment that creates dark-colored skin, absorbs sunlight and serves as a natural sunscreen.

Tanning increases the amount of protective melanin in the skin, reducing the risk of severe sunburn, but that doesn't mean that students should rush to the tanning parlor to get a preemptive tan. Dermatologists are fond of saying, "there is no such thing as a safe tan," and there is plenty of evidence to back them up. A 2002 report in the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute* suggested that tanning bed users are twice as likely to develop some non-melanoma types of skin cancer, the same types of skin cancer commonly found in farmers and other exposed outdoor workers.

The overall incidence of skin cancer is rising as people who spend more time doing outdoor activities visit tanning salons. The American Academy of Dermatology (AAD) estimated that one in five Americans will develop skin cancer in his lifetime. The good news is that fatalities from skin cancer have decreased as doctors and patients have become more vigilant in spotting abnormal skin

growths.

"Early recognition is big," Davis said.

UV damage to skin also has aesthetic consequences. The sun's rays can cause irregular pigmentation on the face and other parts of the skin, commonly in women who take birth control pills with the hormone estrogen, Davis said.

Moreover, some UV rays can penetrate the second layer of skin, which contains the tissue responsible for the skin's elasticity, Davis said. To see this elasticity at work, pull up the skin on the back of your hand and watch it snap back into place. As your skin ages, it will take longer to return to its original shape, and sagging and wrinkles will appear. UV damage from tanning or burning accelerates the aging process of elastic tissue.

Davis said it is important to head off damaging sunlight at the pass with a few simple preventive measures.

Sunscreen technology is constantly improving, although Davis cautioned that sunscreens still don't provide complete protection. Most sunscreens on store shelves now claim to be "broad spectrum," meaning they contain chemicals that absorb both UVA and UVB, the two types of UV radiation that reach the earth's surface.

For those who complain about sunscreen's greasy feel, new alcohol-based brands rub on and dry out quickly. Davis said he advises purchasing broad-spectrum sunscreens rated at a skin protection factor (SPF) of 30. Skin protected with properly applied SPF 30 sunscreen will take 30 times longer to burn than unprotected skin.

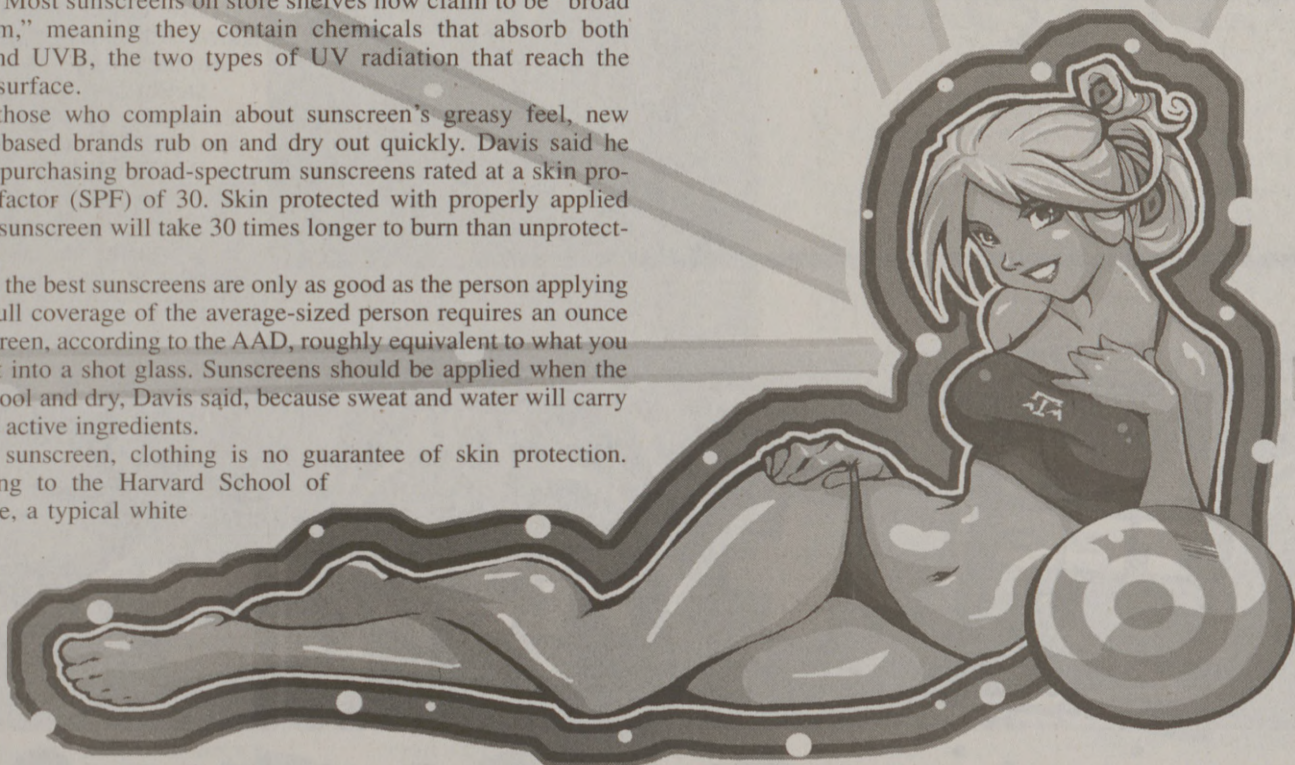
Even the best sunscreens are only as good as the person applying them. Full coverage of the average-sized person requires an ounce of sunscreen, according to the AAD, roughly equivalent to what you could fit into a shot glass. Sunscreens should be applied when the skin is cool and dry, Davis said, because sweat and water will carry away its active ingredients.

Like sunscreen, clothing is no guarantee of skin protection. According to the Harvard School of Medicine, a typical white

T-shirt has an SPF of only five - even less when it is wet. Davis said a simple laundry additive such as SunGuard adds an SPF of 30 to most clothing and lasts about 20 washes. He added that UV filtering sunglasses are essential, no matter what you are wearing.

The safest strategy is to limit the amount of time spent in the sun, especially in the middle of the day when the sun's rays are fiercest. Most UV radiation will penetrate cloud cover, so overcast days are no guarantee of safety.

Inevitably, a few spring break revelers will suffer a severe sunburn - the kind of sunburn that makes a person shriek with pain if a friend so much as pretends to pat them on the back. Anti-inflammatory drugs such as aspirin and ibuprofen can soothe the pain of sunburn, Davis said, but the most immediate relief may come from the application of a refrigerated aloe-containing lotion.



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Rhonda D'Agostino  
Cathryn Clement  
Tate Rosenbusch

The International Office of the  
Agriculture Program  
Rm 12 Administration Bldg.  
979-845-4164

