Understanding Sunscreen Adherence
by Kathryn Lee

With only about 20 percent of adults in the United States using sunscreen regularly and many not using sufficient amounts, this topic deserves some attention, especially as May is skin cancer awareness month. But we’re all just as guilty of not using sunscreen correctly at some point in time, and the statistics prove it. More than 2.2 million cases of skin cancer occur each year, and as many as one in five Americans will develop skin cancer in the course of a lifetime. So, why don’t we follow the recommendations when we all know the consequences? The most frequent barriers reported for lack of sunscreen adherence include forgetting, inconvenience of application, and the desire to have a tan.

With that being said, you’ll never guess the most recent study conducted to help increase sunscreen application adherence—text messaging reminders! At the conclusion of the study, the control group achieved a mean adherence of 30 percent, while the group receiving daily reminder text messages (including the local daily forecast) had a mean adherence almost double that of the control group—56.1 percent.

What does this mean for pharmacists? Well, you could develop a program to send mass text message reminders about sunscreen adherence, or you can simply develop other methods to promote positive behavioral change as well. Some examples are to create a brochure to have in the waiting area, a reminder sticker placed on each prescription bag, signs posted around the pharmacy, email reminders, or snippets about adherence in general in local newspapers or on your business radio advertisement. It only takes a minute for your patient to acknowledge these reminders.

Wondering what information you’ll share with your patients? They should be selecting a broad-spectrum sunscreen with at least SPF 15 or 30, which block 93 percent and approximately 97 percent of UVB, respectively. Of note, there is no sufficient data to support SPF’s higher than 50.

With warmer weather arriving, education about proper sunscreen use is a simple way to improve your patients’ adherence and prevent them from becoming a statistic.

All sunscreens should be applied at least 15–30 minutes prior to exposure and then reapplied at least every two hours. Also, remind your patients that no sunscreen is truly waterproof as they all eventually wash off, but do follow application instructions provided on waterproof products. “Water resistant” products are recommended to be reapplied every 40 minutes, and “very water resistant” products are recommended to be reapplied every 80 minutes. Last, but not least, is the importance of sunscreen application quantity, considering that most Americans only apply a quarter of the recommended amount. The Food and Drug Administration, American Cancer Society, and American Academy of Dermatologists recommend approximately one ounce of sunscreen for application to the face, neck, arms and shoulders, torso, legs, and top of feet for each application.

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Kathryn Lee is a 2012 PharmD candidate at the University of Iowa College of Pharmacy.