

# The healing SUN

Carolyn Moody celebrates  
the recuperative power  
of sunlight.

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“Sunbathing is one of life’s great pleasures. For some of us, exposing our skin to the gentle warmth of the sun’s rays in the spring and early summer is a form of sun-worship...

The sun seems to strengthen us and lift our spirits.” So begins Richard Hobday in his book, *The Healing Sun*, written to balance our 21<sup>st</sup> century paranoia of the sun and skin cancer.

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Sunlight has a profound influence on our health and has been known to have healing powers since ancient times. Hippocrates, the father of medicine, used heliotherapy

(sun therapy) to heal his patients. In 1903, the Nobel Prize for medicine was awarded to Danish physician, Niels Finsen, for his success in treating tuberculosis of the skin with ultraviolet radiation.

Much research has shown that the sun’s rays may play a key role in preventing and ameliorating a number of serious degenerative and infectious diseases, including cancer; diabetes; high blood pressure; osteoarthritis; cardiovascular disease; multiple sclerosis; osteoporosis; blood sugar disorders; winter depression; skin problems like acne, eczema and psoriasis, and, because of its anti-fungal effect, a rare malignant skin cancer called mycosis fungoides.

Sunlight can penetrate far enough into our skin to irradiate the blood, acting as a natural antibiotic, boosting immunity, oxygenating tissues and killing bacteria, even when it passes through window glass.

## SUNLIGHT AND VITAMIN D

Sunlight activates the production of vitamin D in the skin. Excess production is then stored in the liver for winter. We are all spending less time outdoors in the sunshine so do not make enough vitamin D to

store. And as people get older, they become less efficient at making vitamin D through sunlight.

The US National Institutes of Health's Medline online database highlights over five thousand papers showing that those with higher levels of vitamin D cut their risk of dying from cancer by half, including skin cancer. Vitamin D works by blocking the growth of new blood vessels that allow tumours to grow, a process known as angiogenesis.

EU daily recommendations for vitamin D were raised in 2012 from 200 ius to 4,000 ius per day, but many researchers are saying that even these levels aren't enough for cancer prevention and treatment.

It is impossible to overdose on vitamin D made by sunshine because as skin tans the amount of vitamin D being manufactured decreases.

The best dietary sources of vitamin D are oily fish, such as salmon, sardines and mackerel, eggs and cod liver oil.

In Belgium, doctors readily do blood tests for vitamin D.

### SUNSCREEN

Skin cancers have increased over the years due to people spending up to 90% of their time indoors and then using sunscreen to expose their skin to hours of strong sunshine. The American Journal of Public Health in 1992 reported that the widespread use of chemical sunscreens may have contributed to the rise in rates of melanoma in the last 40 years:

“In the United States, Canada, Australia and the Scandinavian countries, melanoma rates have risen steeply in recent decades with the greatest increase occurring after the introduction of sunscreens...”

Sunscreens stop the body from manufacturing vitamin D and many of the ingredients, such as dioxybenzone and oxybenzone, are powerful free radical generators or have estrogenic properties – i.e. they have the potential to cause cancer and accelerate the aging process. Up to 35% of the chemicals in sunscreen may be absorbed through the skin and passed into the bloodstream, and many of them become more toxic when exposed to sunshine.

### NATURAL SKIN PROTECTION

Sunlight on skin causes free radical damage, but so does every biochemical reaction in the body. Loss of elasticity in the skin is caused by the ageing process which is provoked by a drop in hormones and free radical damage from many other sources besides sunshine, including smoking, stress, alcohol and poor diet.

The body has antioxidising enzymes that neutralise free radicals and these are made from nutrients in our diet. What you eat can help protect against skin cancer and sun damage. Most important are beta-carotene, found in carrots and all orange, red and yellow vegetables; selenium, zinc, vitamin E and vitamin C found in seeds, nuts, quinoa, wholegrains and fresh fruit; and essential fatty acids, especially omega-3 fatty acids from fish, walnuts and flax (lin)seed. Lycopene from tomatoes is particularly effective at preventing sunburn.

The key to safe sunbathing is never to burn as burning skin increases the risk of developing skin cancer. Far safer is to sunbathe in the early morning sun in spring and early summer. Start with 10-20 minutes, depending on your skin type and gradually build up a tan slowly.

While it is better to cover up with light clothing and a hat, natural sunscreens based on titanium dioxide or zinc oxide are available online and through pharmacies and health food stores.

In the event that you over do it, pure aloe vera gel takes the sting out of sunburn and speeds up skin repair. ■



**Carolyn Moody** is an Optimum Nutritionist and Live a Conscious Life Transformational Coach with 22 years experience helping people develop excellent mental, physical and emotional health.

[www.bodybalancehealth.eu](http://www.bodybalancehealth.eu)

[carolyn@bodybalancehealth.eu](mailto:carolyn@bodybalancehealth.eu)

Tel: +32 (0)10 400 558 or +32 (0)478 565 282