

Light Your Way to Health

By Terri Saunders

For millions of years Earth's inhabitants have evolved under the rays of the sun. The sun keeps us warm, enables us to see, helps us track the passing of time, and provides essential energy for life.

Throughout time, humans have worshipped the sun, recognizing its immense powers. Sun deities presided over virtually all ancient civilizations including Egypt, Greece, Rome, and the Mayans. Temples were erected to honor the sun and capture solar rays for healing.

Sunlight has been used as medicine for thousands of years. In his book, "The Healing Sun", Richard Hobday recounts the rise and fall of sunlight therapy, or heliotherapy, named after the Greek sun god Helios. Heliotherapy was practiced by noted physicians Hippocrates, Ephesus and Avicenna who prescribed sun bathing for all kinds of disease. The Greeks advocated exercising outside in the nude, believing that the sun's rays imparted strength and stamina in the athletes. The word gymnasium is derived from the word "gymnasion" meaning a place for naked exercise. With the advent of Christianity and the "dark ages", sunlight therapy fell from grace due to its close association with paganism.

It wasn't until the tuberculosis epidemic in late 19th century Europe that heliotherapy made a comeback. In 1877 British scientists Dr. Arthur Downes and Thomas Blunt discovered that sunlight had a bactericidal effect. Then German bacteriologist Robert Koch discovered the bacterium that caused TB, and found that sunlight was capable of preventing and curing the disease. During WWI, before the availability of antibiotics, sunlight was used to heal wounds.

As a result of these discoveries, hospitals sprung up across Europe designed to harness solar radiation for healing. Heliotherapy was a precise science which considered the constitution and skin type of the patient, and exposure time required for healing. Sunlight therapy was administered in the early morning very gradually over a period of several weeks or months in cool temperatures (ideal was 64°F) and fresh air. Rest, diet, and sometimes sea bathing were also prescribed. Heliotherapy was successful in healing TB and other conditions including rickets, septic abscesses, osteomyelitis (infection of the bone), anemia and fractures.

Unfortunately, with the discovery of antibiotics sunlight therapy once again fell into obscurity and the valuable knowledge gained by heliotherapists is no longer taught in medical schools. Even more remarkable is the current medical view that the sun is harmful and to be avoided. Today we are told to avoid exposure to the sun, to cover up when outside, and to use sunscreen. We are warned that if we do not take these precautions, we will surely contract skin cancer and age at an accelerated rate. Yet is this really true?

The solar rays that penetrate the Earth's atmosphere are made up of 37% visible light seen as the colors of the rainbow, 3% ultraviolet waves, and 60% infrared waves perceived as heat. 98% of solar radiation enters the body through the eyes, and 2% enters the skin. The ultraviolet rays that sunscreens are designed to block include UVA rays and UVB rays. These are the rays that cause sunburn and possibly contribute to skin cancer. Basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma are skin cancers that rarely cause death, while melanoma can spread throughout the body and be fatal.

One of the very important benefits of the ultraviolet rays, and UVB in particular, is that it is essential for these rays to contact our skin in order for us to manufacture Vitamin D. In fact, sunlight exposure is the primary way we obtain Vitamin D. Small amounts of Vitamin D can be obtained from fatty fish, full cream milk, butter, and organ meats. Vitamin D supplements are poorly assimilated and can be toxic, while Vitamin D from the sun never is.

Vitamin D is actually a hormone produced in the body that plays a vital part in regulating body functions. Vitamin D maintains the correct balance of calcium and phosphorous for bone formation and remodeling. If Vitamin D levels are low, we cannot absorb calcium, no matter how much we supplement. This is why sunlight therapy was so effective in healing rickets, a disease of malformation of the bones associated with Vitamin D deficiency. Osteoporosis, osteomalacia and tooth decay are all related to this deficiency.

Sunlight and its interaction with Vitamin D is essential to a healthy circulatory system. Studies show that a substance in the skin called squalene is converted by the sun to Vitamin D, but in the absence of sunlight it is converted into cholesterol. High cholesterol is more prevalent in the winter and in higher latitudes where the sun's rays are not as strong.

A study done in 1935 showed that UV radiation can lower blood pressure in 60 to 70 percent of hypertensive people. Incidence of high blood pressure is also greater in the winter and lower in the summer and higher at distances farther from the equator. Dark-skinned people have a higher incidence of high blood pressure and high cholesterol in the northern hemisphere than in their native countries. Considering that the skin pigment melanin (a protectant from UV rays) is greater in dark-skinned races, they require six times the level of solar radiation in northern climates than fair-skinned people to receive the same benefit from the sun.

Sunlight increases the oxygen content of the blood much like exercise does. A 1998 study of 600 patients admitted to a British hospital after their first heart attack showed that deaths were more frequent among patients in sunless north-facing rooms than those in sunlit rooms. More people die of heart attacks in winter than the rest of the year.

Sunlight lowers blood sugar in diabetics, heals psoriasis, eczema, acne, viral and fungal infections, and speeds up elimination of toxic chemicals. Exposing jaundiced infants to sunlight or blue light successfully reduces high bilirubin levels in the blood. Sun exposure in childhood can also help prevent childhood diabetes and multiple sclerosis.

Apparently, there is no evidence that the thinning ozone layer has created an increase in UV radiation. There is also no scientific evidence that the sun's rays cause melanoma. In fact, incidence of melanoma is greater in the northern latitudes where the sun's rays are weaker. Melanoma is rare in people who spend much of their time outside, and the parts of the body where melanoma develops are areas that are most often covered by clothing. Basal cell and squamous cell carcinomas can develop in fair-skinned susceptible individuals from overexposure to the sun, but not at the levels suggested for sunlight therapy and optimum health. Research has shown that one third of these cancers occurred in areas receiving less than 20% of the maximum possible UV dose. A healthy diet

with adequate water intake and antioxidant supplementation has been proven to help prevent skin cancer and aging.

Sunscreens are particularly problematic, considering that most consist of toxic chemicals that make us more susceptible to cancer. They also block the UV rays from penetrating the skin to make Vitamin D. In fact, skin cancer rates increased dramatically when sunscreens were first introduced and continue to rise in populations that use them.

In truth, healthy exposure to the sun can actually decrease your chances of developing cancer and even help to heal it. In his book, "Health and Light" photobiologist Dr. John Ott tells of a study at Bellevue Medical Center in New York City in 1959. 15 cancer patients were asked to spend as much time as possible in natural sunlight without glasses or sunglasses and to avoid artificial light and television. After three months, 14 out of 15 patients showed no further advancement of tumor growth, and several improved. The one patient that didn't respond wore glasses. Glass blocks 99% of UV rays, as do UV protective eyeglasses and contact lenses.

In 1992, Dr. Gordon Ainsleigh reported that after reviewing 50 years of medical literature on cancer and the sun, he concluded that the benefits of regular sun exposure far outweigh the risks of skin cancer, melanoma and aging. Death rates from cancer of all types, including colon, breast, prostate and ovarian, are greatest in areas of lower solar radiation and lowest in regions within 20 degrees of the equator. U.S. cancer rates are 40% higher in the northern states than in the south.

Of greater concern is the vast number of people who do not get enough sunlight due to lifestyle and "Vitamin D Winters" caused by seasonal changes and location. Unlike their ancestors, today most humans spend 90% of their time indoors shielded from the sun's rays. Many office buildings have tinted windows that don't open and recirculated air that breeds pathogens. Incandescent and standard fluorescent bulbs both lack UV rays and some colors of the light spectrum. Long-term exposure to these lights cause adrenal stress, depression, weak immunity and other health problems.

Our bodies were designed to accommodate changes in solar intensity throughout the seasons, and store some of the Vitamin D created in the spring and summer for use in the fall and winter. Inadequate sun exposure during times of strong sunlight can result in health problems later as rays weaken.

Seasonal Affective Disorder or S.A.D. refers to depression that occurs during the winter triggered by a decline in solar radiation. As sunlight enters the eyes it stimulates the hypothalamus to secrete serotonin, the hormone that keeps us calm and emotionally balanced. At night, darkness stimulates the pineal gland to secrete melatonin which slows down the metabolism and enables us to sleep and rejuvenate. Sunlight is our external timekeeper that regulates our biological clock, or circadian rhythms. It is said that to maintain health, each day we need to receive at least 1 to 2 hours of natural sunlight and 8 hours of deep restful sleep in complete darkness.

Dr. Ott was known to say that modern man suffers from "mal-illumination" caused by insufficient or poor quality light. He was responsible for inventing full spectrum bulbs to simulate sunlight indoors. A study done on the effects of conventional vs. full spectrum light bulbs showed that when standard fluorescents in classrooms were replaced by full spectrum fluorescents, the behavior, health and grades of the children improved dramatically. Businesses that make the switch notice increased employee productivity and reduced

absenteeism. While full spectrum lighting has been particularly helpful for those with S.A.D., we can all benefit from this energy-efficient healthy type of lighting.

Of course, there is no replacement for natural sunlight and the vital energy that it gives us. How wonderful to know that this powerful healing therapy is just a step outside, and it is free.

Terri Saunders is an Herbalist, Nutritional Consultant, and Certified Natural Health Professional in Charlottesville, Virginia where she does in-person and telephone consultations and classes on natural healing. She can be reached at Sunrise Herb Shoppe at 434-984-2665, or email at sunherb@mindspring.com. See website at www.sunriseherbshop.com for additional information on consultations, products and classes.

If you are interested in purchasing full spectrum bulbs and other light therapy products, I highly recommend the Light Energy Company at 1-800-544-4826. You can check out their website at www.lightenergycompany.com to see what they have to offer, but it is best to place your order by phone and speak with David or Pam Olszewski to discuss your needs. The phone number given is a voice mail number but they will return your call promptly. Please mention my name, Terri Saunders, and this article when you speak with them.

Note: The compact fluorescent bulbs found in hardware stores are not full-spectrum bulbs. Neither are the purple tinted chromolux bulbs which filter out the yellow rays.