

Article Launched: 07/28/2005 01:01:00 AM

Battling the burn

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Kelly Ramos, 6, emerges from the pool at Eisenhower Recreation Center, 4300 E. Dartmouth Ave. in Denver. The pool participates in Pool Cool, a national program that encourages young swimmers to swath themselves in sunscreen to help avoid melanoma. (Post / Meg Loucks)

The clock says 3 p.m., the thermometer has passed 100, and Zenith Ward, pool supervisor at Eisenhower Recreation Center, orders everyone out of the water.

"Into the shade," bellows the 20-year-old, bullhorn in hand, just as the day's heat record and everyone in earshot was turning to toast last week.

As the pool empties for a break, Ward and the other lifeguards stroll the perimeter, urging children and their parents to reapply sunscreen.

Forget to bring some? No problem. Giant, 1-gallon jugs complete with easy-access pumps are available at pool's edge. A squirt is free, and no skimping allowed.

A purpose lies behind this generosity and a healthy slathering of goo. For the past three years, all of Denver's Parks and Recreation outdoor pools, as well as those in most of the area's suburbs, have participated in a national program called Pool Cool to study - and fundamentally change - people's behavior regarding skin cancer prevention.



Anne Franklin applies sunscreen to Katie, her 5-year-old daughter, at the Eisenhower Recreation Center pool. Denver parks participate in a national program that makes young swimmers aware of the risks of overexposure to the sun. (Post / Meg Loucks)

"Skin cancer is the fastest-growing form of cancer in the country," says Tom Elliott, project director at the Rollins School of Public Health at Emory University in Atlanta.

By age 18, according to some studies, children will already have received as much as 80 percent of their lifelong skin damage from the sun.

"The idea is to get to them young," Elliott says. He hopes repeating the sunscreen message enough will make it automatic, just like brushing teeth or any other health habit.

While all ages can participate in Pool Cool, the target age range for the program is 5 to 10 years.

In many ways, the clock is ticking for those trying to spread the message to today's children: Melanoma, the most serious form of skin cancer, is now the leading cause of cancer death among women ages 25 to 29. Those cases

typically come from years of exposure to the sun, usually in childhood.

About one in 70 people will be diagnosed with melanoma in their lifetime. In Colorado, with its sunny days, high elevation and outdoorsy population, it is one in 45.

And the numbers continue to climb. Nationally, cases of melanoma increased about 10 percent between 2004 and 2005.

In addition to melanoma, 1 million new cases of basal or squamous cell skin cancer, considered less serious but potentially disfiguring, were diagnosed last year.

Still, for as often as those statistics are spoken to young ears, a disconnect seemingly exists between knowledge and action when children reach teenage years and believe themselves to be invincible.

A 2002 study by Pediatrics medical journal found that more than a third of 17-year-old girls acknowledged using tanning salons because they thought they looked better with a tan. Among 14-year-olds, it was 7 percent.

That becomes even more troubling when coupled with data from the American Academy of Dermatology, which surveyed 12- to 17-year-olds. When they were asked if they knew suntanning could be dangerous, a resounding 79 percent said "yes."

So new strategies are now being developed since scary statistics alone are not doing the trick.

In California, Valerie Guild, a mother with no political background, has made skin cancer prevention her life's mission after her daughter, Charlie, died of melanoma at age 26.

Guild's mission is to make sun-safety education mandatory in public schools. Recently, lawmakers in Arizona and New York approved such measures and one is pending in California.

Additionally, 22 states now limit access to tanning beds for teenagers but enforcement remains problematic.

In just three years, the Pool Cool program has spread to 400 outdoor pools across the country, with the Denver area being one of its most active participants. It is sponsored by Emory and the National Recreation and Park Association. Funding is underwritten by the National Cancer Institute.

Not only does the program supply free sunscreen, it also offers sun-safety lesson plans and quizzes for instructors to give during daily swim lessons.

Any student who answers the questions correctly receives a prize, such as a water bottle to urge hydration or bracelets and stickers that change color in the sun when it's time to reapply sunscreen. Pretty sneaky, this behavior modification stuff.

At the Eisenhower Pool, the staff this year was rewarded by the national project for its success. It won a blue, tentlike shade structure to help poolgoers grab some shade.

As the swimmers form a sunscreen circle, rubbing cream onto each other's shoulders during the 3 p.m. break, Anne Franklin watches from the sidelines in amazement. The Denver mother of three can remember when she was in high school and the goal was to drench yourself in baby oil to tan as much as possible.

But vanity gives way to fear when you become a parent. Her children, still years away from adolescence, have been slathered with sunscreen since they were babies. She says she does not think any of them has ever been badly burned.

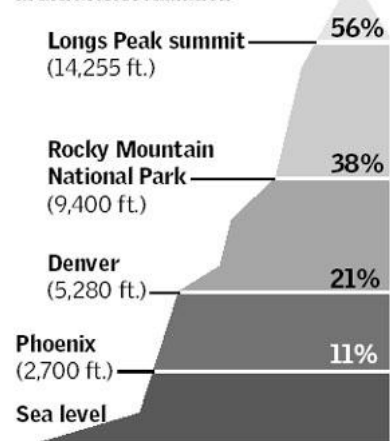
Maybe theirs will be the generation that turns things around. "They all know about sunscreen," she says. "Sometimes when I forget, they are the ones who remind me."

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Ultraviolet radiation and elevation

The sun's intensity increases about 4 percent for every 1,000 feet of elevation gain:

Percentage increase in ultraviolet radiation



Source: Colorado Department of Health and the Environment

The Denver Post