How to Create a Lupus Sun Protection Kit

by BARBARA LEECH

Create a Lupus Sun Protection Kit to Keep Yourself Well

Lupus is very sensitive to the sun, so I have been experimenting with sun-protective clothing, hats and basically anything I can think of to keep me going.

Sadly, having lupus means limiting or avoiding the sun's UV rays, while everyone around you is soaking it all in. I recently had an immediate reaction from being outside on a cloudy day, chaperoning my son's field trip.

I thought I was safer than normal with the cloud cover. I was mistaken. I went home with a blazing lupus facial rash and felt so sick I thought I caught the flu.

Up to 70 percent of people with lupus have some level of sensitivity to sunlight. Excess sun exposure can cause flares in people with systemic lupus and aggravate cutaneous lupus.

Exactly how UV light aggravates lupus is unknown. But there are several methods of protection, which when complied together, create a summer lupus sun protection kit.

What Is the Trigger?

Photosensitivity is a serious enough to completely disrupt normal outdoor activity for me. But when I counter the attack of this lupus trigger with a kit filled with sun protection, I can venture outdoors and enjoy normal activities.

The kit (a basket or large canvas bag) should be well stocked and ready to take with you and you should be dressed defensively.

Basically, the sun shines down a spectrum of radiation upon us. There are UVA (ultraviolet A) and UVB (ultraviolet B) rays, which are both problems for those with lupus.

Each deliver different types of radiation so protection issues are different. UVB is significantly more intense in the summer months and at its worst between the hours of 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. But UVA rays remain at a steady intensity all day long and throughout the year.

With lupus, we must protect ourselves all day, every day and through all four seasons. Planning activities in the morning or late afternoon will help you avoid the more dangerous level of rays. And don't let your guard down even on cloudy days — full body protection is required before going out.

What Is in a Sun Defense Kit?

I have learned my lesson after my cloudy day fiasco. I now keep my defense kit with the basics I need and add new items like specialized sun protective clothing as I buy them.

Sunscreen

I look for one that is hypoallergenic, has broad-spectrum protection, and has an SPF of 30 or greater. It is great if you can find an organic one that works well. My luck with that so far has been limited.

You should look for the words “broad spectrum” on your sunscreen. It refers to blocking both UVA and UVB rays. You should know that the SPF (sun protection factor) only measures UVB protection.

Labeling laws regarding UVA protection are currently being defined by the FDA. One way to check if UVA is being blocked is to read the ingredient panel and see if ingredients such as zinc oxide, titanium dioxide and parsol 1789 are included.

Make sure you apply enough and take it with you to reapply! I have read that most of us do not use enough sunscreen when we apply. A good example of an amount to use is about one teaspoon for an adult face and neck.

You should apply your sunscreen about 20 minutes before leaving the house. Most health experts recommend reapplying sunscreens every couple of hours or more frequently if you are sweating or swimming.

A recent study found that reapplying 20 minutes after stepping outside, instead of waiting 2 hours, can reduce your UV exposure by as much a 40 percent.

Remember that the heat may change the chemical composition of sunscreen and make it less affective, so don’t store it in your car or other places that get extra hot.

Next page: three more items for your lupus sun protection kit.

What Is in a Sun Defense Kit?

A Sun Hat

My next layer of defense is a hat with a brim of three to four inches or greater, which provides the maximum protection to my face. Sun hats with a downward slanting brim help a lot in protecting your face as the sun approaches from any direction.

Clothing

This is a new one for me. I was resistant to it for some reason, but this last lupus flare got me putting my stubbornness aside and finding ways to layer my protection.

Clothing is also a great option for those with sensitivity to sunscreen ingredients. Plus, this level of protection will not wash off, be wiped away by sweat or rub off during the day. Having a sun protective shirt and scarf in my protection kit means I am better prepared.

Basically, anything you can put between you and the sun will help block the sun's rays. So what do you look for?

With everyday clothing, the thicker, darker and tighter the weave of the fabric, the better your protection. The type of fabric also makes a difference; cotton is the least UV protective. The average T-shirt blocks only 50 percent of the ultraviolet light and when wet that protection dramatically drops. Lycra and polyester have the most UV-blocking ability with nylon somewhere in the middle.

Then there are special garments designed for sun protection. These are special garments and everyday clothing labeled for sun-protective qualities and have been rated by an independent laboratory for their sun blocking ability and then given a UPF (ultraviolet protection factor) rating.

Most sun protective fabrics are tightly woven/knit and may (or may not) be chemically treated with UV inhibitors. Fabrics from cotton to polyester are used, with the most common being nylon.

I have found them to be more breathable and cooler than regular clothing. Sun-protective clothing can be specially designed to increase sun protection, as well as help keep you cooler and more comfortable on a hot day.

I look for features like air vents and a collar for added neck protection. Sun-protective clothing also provides protection even when they get wet. So if you are at the park, you can dampen your shirt or hat with some water and you can stay fresher and cooler.

An Umbrella

An umbrella is required if I must be out in full sunlight (like at my son's ballgame) and it actually provides a lot of protection. If I go to the beach (which I do only once per year now) I have a big beach umbrella to set myself down under.

Things to Keep in Mind

- **The sun is very sneaky.** Even on a cloudy day as much as 80 percent of its harmful rays can reach you. You must move with your shady spot; the shade travels as the day progresses so what is shady at 10 a.m. may be sunny at 11 a.m.
- **Some lupus medications can make us more sensitive to the sun.** Always read the labels for this.
- **The sun can be reflected by water, snow, sand, and even that cement sidewalk you are strolling on.** Those rays can bounce.
- **The sun gets to you in your car.** Although UVB is blocked by glass, there are UVA rays still coming through.
- **The higher you go, the more intense the sun is.** Its rays increase four to five percent with every 1000 feet of elevation.

Spending less time in the sun may be necessary, but there are times I cannot avoid it. I must be prepared. My kit is something I use and take with me as I leave the house each day.