

Sunscreen labels to change, but not before summer

BY JENNIFER C. KERR • ASSOCIATED PRESS • MAY 31, 2010

WASHINGTON — A clearer, more meaningful standard for sunscreen labels is coming soon to a lotion near you, but not in time for the summer beach season that kicks off today.

The Food and Drug Administration is working to finish new labeling rules that have been years in the making, but not before October.

The current labeling system for sunscreen products is problematical, concedes Dr. James Spencer, spokesman for the American Academy of Dermatology. But as millions throng to the beaches, he counsels: "Sunscreen is the best you can do for now, and we're working on better."

The idea behind the new federal regulations is to make labels less confusing, so consumers know exactly what kind of protection they're getting.

Most sunscreens on the market boast "broad spectrum UVA and UVB protection." There's a standard test to determine protection from the ultraviolet-B rays that cause sunburn — the familiar SPF rankings that tell people how long they can stay out in the sun before a burn.

But there is not a standard test to check protection from ultraviolet-A rays, the ones linked to cancer and wrinkles. That means it's not clear how much UVA protection people are getting from their sunscreens.

The rules expected this fall would change that, with a standard testing protocol and four-star UVA rating system first proposed in 2007. It would spell out the protection level as "low," "medium," "high," or "highest" — with one star representing low UVA protection, and four the highest protection available.

The FDA's Dr. Matthew Holman says the agency received more than 3,000 comments in response to the UVA-rating system, with many for and against.

The opposition said consumers will still find the label confusing because of the two separate rating systems, a numerical SPF rating for UVB and a four-star rating for UVA protection.

Holman, deputy director at FDA's division of nonprescription regulation development, said the agency is still evaluating the comments. He would not say if the final rule would adopt the four-star system.

The new rules, as proposed, would also cap the highest SPF value at 50. Anything above that would be labeled "50 plus."

Holman says it is not clear there's an accurate test to prove sun protection factor above 50.

In the meantime, Spencer, a dermatologist in St. Petersburg, Fla., says people need to be sure to slather on plenty of sunscreen — a shot glass full of lotion for adults. Most people only put on about 25 to 50 percent of the lotion they need to protect them, he said.

He recommends a sunscreen with broad spectrum protection — UVA and UVB — and it should be at least an SPF 30.