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IAEM issues advice to parents on prevention of Sunburn and Scalds in Children

While the general state of the Irish weather might make it hard to believe, every year Emergency Departments (EDs) in Ireland see patients, particularly children, who have sustained significant sunburn, an easily avoided occurrence. Sun exposure (through ultraviolet light) is, of itself, actually good for children as it is an important source of Vitamin D which is necessary for healthy bone growth. Nonetheless, from a parent's perspective, it is important that child sun exposure is controlled and that skin protection is used appropriately.

Parents should be particularly vigilant about sun exposure in babies and toddlers who are most susceptible to sunburn. Children should always wear a hat and some form of neck protection. Total sunblock creams (Factor 50+) should be used on babies and toddlers while older children may use lower factor creams but no child should use less than a Factor 20+ sun cream. Parents should make sure that all exposed areas are covered, paying particular attention to areas that are often missed e.g. ears, nose and feet. Children should ideally be kept out of the sun during the period of peak exposure, typically from 12 noon to 3pm.

While this advice is relevant to sun exposure in Ireland, it is even more pertinent to those Irish people who holiday in sunnier climates.

Another burn injury commonly seen in children is the scald from hot tea or coffee. Emerging research points to the fact that the particular scenario of a toddler pulling a cup of hot tea onto him/her is significantly more common in Ireland and the UK than in other countries. This phenomenon is related to the frequency and amount of tea we consume in these islands but raises the need for extra vigilance by adults who are drinking hot drinks around small children. One should never underestimate the ingenuity and agility of toddlers and young children in the kitchen!

These injuries are, unfortunately, very common and often quite significant with deep burns to the face, chest and arms not infrequently occurring. Many children require skin grafting and multiple operations to minimise the functional and cosmetic effects of these preventable injuries.

The Irish Association for Emergency Medicine is keen to see fewer children coming to EDs with preventable injuries and wishes therefore to remind parents/guardians of the risks to their children associated with both sun exposure and being scalded with hot liquids in the home.

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