HOW STRONG IS STRONG ENOUGH FOR SUNSCREEN?

It used to be that SPF topped out at 30. No more. Now SPF creep has hit the triple digits, with Neutrogena’s SPF 100+ sun block, leading some dermatologists to complain that this is merely a numbers game that confuses consumers.

On The Early Show on Friday, May 15, 2009, CBS News Medical Correspondent Dr. Jennifer Ashton explained how much SPF is enough and how to properly use sunscreen to truly protect yourself.

A sunscreen’s SPF, or sun protection factor, measures how much the product shields the sun’s shorter-wave ultraviolet B rays, known as UVB radiation, which can cause sunburn.

WHAT DO THE NUMBERS MEAN?

A sunscreen’s SPF measures how much the product shields ultraviolet B rays which can cause sunburn. 20 years ago, 15 was the highest one. Then 30 became the standard. Now the most popular is 30. But we also have 50, 75 and the 100 SPF was just launched.

IF INSTEAD OF USING SPF 50 I USE 100, AM I GETTING DOUBLE PROTECTION, WHICH MEANS 100% SUN PROTECTION?

Not really. There isn’t such a thing as 100% protection. A SPF 100 means 99 percent blocking of UVB rays.

The difference in UVB protection between an SPF 100 and SPF 50 is marginal. Far from offering double the blockage, SPF 100 blocks 99 percent of UVB rays, while SPF 50 blocks 98 percent. SPF 30, that old-timer, holds its own, deflecting 96.7 percent.

SO HOW MUCH SPF IS ENOUGH TO BE PROTECTED?

The higher the SPF the more time before you must reapply. A person who turns red after 20 minutes of unprotected sun exposure is theoretically protected 15 times longer if they adequately apply SPF 15. Because a lot of sunscreens rub off or don’t stay put, dermatologists advise reappplication every two hours or after swimming or sweating. The key here is not the SPF, but how you are using sunscreen. Are you applying it right?

WHAT’S THE PROPER WAY TO APPLY IT?

The amount is very important. To get the SPF on a bottle, you must apply the amount of a shotglass. If you use half as much, you getting half the SPF.

When you put it on is also important, 20 minutes before sun exposure is ideal.

And how often you reapply is really crucial to avoiding sun damage and staying protected.

For much more on sunscreen, visit the Web site of the American Academy of Dermatology (www.aad.org)