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How to beat the burn this summer

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Mother sitting on beach putting sun cream on son (8-10) ground view

Getty Images

Snow is a thing of the past. The chilly temperatures are a distant memory. You've traded in your sweaters, boots and scarves for tank tops, sandals and sun hats. But there's one more thing you might want to consider switching up: your skin care routine.

Skin is the body's largest organ and serves as a protective barrier between everything that's inside your body and the outside world. It helps regulate body temperature and works as a natural filter constantly replacing old skin cells with new ones.

It's no wonder that experts frequently tout the importance of a proper skin care routine — especially in the summertime. Everyone knows that ultraviolet rays from the sun are dangerous, even cancer causing. But some experts argue that the sunscreen we use as protection might be doing more harm than good. There are also some people who forgo sunscreen altogether. So what should you do?



Scan the screens

A good sunscreen is often the first line of defense against the sun's rays to prevent sunburns and reduce the risk of skin cancer. And it's essential to use a sunscreen that has a broad spectrum SPF of at least 30, according to several experts and the Melanoma Research Foundation. Broad spectrum means that the sunscreen blocks both UVA and UVB rays.

"SPF 30 blocks about 97 percent of UVB radiation, while SPF 50 blocks about 98 percent," says Shelby Moneer, director of education at the MRF and co-chair of the National Council on Skin Cancer Prevention.

Shara Strand is a skin care expert and a professional makeup artist in New York City. She says the sun is the "biggest damager" of skin. And, of course, UVA and UVB rays are the strongest in the summer.

“Not only can it cause dehydration to the skin, but it also can cause sun damage, fine lines and wrinkles,” Strand says. “Dark sun spots are also an evil that comes from spending too much time in the sun.”

Strand also stresses using an SPF 30 lightweight oil-free moisturizer that protects from UVA and UVB rays year-round. “Oil-free is super-important during the summer because our skin is secreting the most oil, which depletes skin of our makeup and causes breakouts,” she says.

And don’t forget to reapply at least every two hours — and more frequently if you’re sweating or going for a swim.

“If you submerge any part of your body in water, always reapply sunscreen,” Strand says. “Never use a sunscreen that’s less than a 30.”

What does “SPF 30” even mean? Dr. Sharad P. Paul, a skin cancer specialist, skin care expert and an adjunct professor at Auckland University of Technology, has a simple way he helps his students remember SPF levels.

“The easy way to remember this is that SPF 15 lets in one in 15 harmful sunrays, while SPF 30 lets in one in 30 and SPF 50 lets in one in 50,” Paul says.

What’s in those bottles?

Some medical experts say sunscreen isn’t all that it’s cracked up to be. Dr. Rohit Sharma is an assistant professor and a surgical oncologist who works with skin cancer patients at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas. He says there have been some reports that the ingredients in sunscreens might be harmful, especially to the endocrine system, which includes the pancreas, ovaries, testes, thyroid gland and adrenal glands.

“Oxybenzone, retinyl palmitate and nanoparticles are the main ingredients that have concerned individuals,” Sharma says. “This concern has stemmed largely from animal research where doses significantly higher than those typically used by humans were tested.”

The Environmental Working Group, a nonprofit based in Washington, D.C., that aims to protect human health and the environment, says it's a good idea to read labels for sunscreens that have vitamin A, also called retinyl palmitate or retinol. Evidence shows that tumors and lesions may develop sooner on skin that's coated with creams that have these ingredients. Also, keep an eye out for oxybenzone, which is a synthetic estrogen that penetrates the skin and can disrupt the hormone system.

Sharma stresses, however, that the Food and Drug Administration has reported that these ingredients are safe.



"You will find advocates on both sides of the argument regarding which ingredients are safe or unsafe," he says. "What we know for certain is that protecting yourself against harmful UV radiation prevents skin cancer. It is up to the individual to decide which type of sunscreen they are most comfortable with. The bottom line: Protect your skin. There are options available to suit your preferences."

If you're worried about chemicals and the potential harmful effects, look for a mineral (physical) sunscreen instead of a chemical-based one. "Physical sunscreens contain natural agents like zinc and titanium oxide," Moneer says. "Physical sunscreens block, rather than absorb, UV rays as they enter the skin."

Some sunscreen companies are even taking steps to ensure that their sun-exposure products are safer. “Many companies, including my own, are trying to remove harmful ingredients and make sunscreens more effective,” Paul says. “I myself have formulated a natural sunscreen that also contains ingredients that reverse some of the sun damage. This sunscreen will be released later this year.”

Efficient exposure

Sharma and Moneer agree that applying sunscreen is just one part of a good skin care regime. Beyond sunscreen, they recommend wearing a wide-brimmed hat, sunglasses and long-sleeve shirts.

“Consider bringing an umbrella or collapsible tent to shade yourself or your child’s team during (sporting) events,” Sharma says. “We need to pay particular attention to protecting children, who often have outdoor activities or sporting events during times of the day when UV exposure is likely to be higher. Repeated, unprotected exposure during this period of life can contribute to skin cancers later on.”

The beach is another danger zone. “Be aware that water and sand can reflect UV radiation, and exposure can come this way, even if you are shaded from above,” Sharma says.

Dr. Eleni Linos is an assistant professor of dermatology at the University of California at San Francisco’s School of Medicine who focuses on sun protection. According to Linos, there are many ways to enjoy nature, exercise and socialize outdoors while minimizing your risk of skin cancer and exposure to direct sunlight.

“Timing a walk or a run outdoors in the early morning or late afternoon is one easy way to avoid the stronger midday sun,” she says. “Think about the schedule of your outdoor activities, and spend time indoors or in the shade during the middle of the day.”

And if all else fails, just stay indoors altogether — particularly on days when the UV index is high, Sharma says. “The UV index is usually published by the local news channel or can be found online,” he says. “If you enjoy outdoor activities that can also be done indoors, like tennis, then switch. You will not only be protecting your skin, but you’ll also be getting the exercise needed to keep your body healthy.”

5 ways to spot skin cancer

Immediately consult a doctor if you find the following:

1. New spots, or old spots with new growths
2. Changes in size, shape or color
3. Suspicious bumps, patches or sores with a prolonged healing process and easy bleeding
4. Redness, spread of pigment or a new swelling beyond the border of a spot
5. Unusual or new itchiness, tenderness or pain of the hyper-pigmented areas or moles

Foods that provide Vitamin D

- Fatty fish
- Beef liver
- Egg yolks
- Fortified milk and orange juice
- Fortified cereals
- Infant formula

Source: Vitamin D Council