



Burn Prevention: Sun Safety

When to See a Doctor for Sunburn

Most sunburns do not require medical attention, however, seek medical treatment if:

- The sunburn has blisters and/or covers more than 15 percent of your body.
- You have a fever (>101°F), headache, severe pain, dehydration, nausea or chills with the sunburn.
- Extreme pain persists longer than 48 hours.
- You've developed a skin infection – swelling, pus, red-streaks – after a sunburn.

Sunburn hurts your skin in more ways than one as the danger extends beyond short-term discomfort. Even after a sunburn fades, lasting damage remains. Sunburn also accelerates skin aging and increases your risk for skin cancer.

Guidelines for Good Sunscreen

Sunscreen is one of the best ways to protect your skin from sun damage. It helps prevent sunburn and early signs of aging while it reduces the risk of skin cancer. When shopping for sunscreen, look for:

- **Broad spectrum protection.** All sunscreens protect against UVB rays, reducing the risk of sunburn, but “broad spectrum” sunscreen protects against both UVA and UVB rays, offering the best protection from sunburn, premature aging and skin cancer.
- **SPF factor.** Look for higher sun protection factor (SPF) sunscreens, which offer a higher degree of protection against UV rays. SPF 30 sunscreens filter out approximately 97 percent of UVB rays, while SPF 100 protects against 99 percent.
- **Water resistant.** While no sunscreen is waterproof, water-resistant sunscreens last anywhere from 40 to 80 minutes while swimming or sweating. Reapply sunscreen every two hours if you are in the water or playing sports.

Be sure to apply sunscreen to every area of your skin that is exposed to the sun. While the neck, face, arms and legs are most commonly sunburned, many people forget about their feet, lips and ears, which also are vulnerable to sunburn.

The Stages of Sunburn

Sunburn is actually a radiation burn caused by overexposure to ultraviolet (UV) rays. When you've had too much sun, the skin turns red and painful within a few hours. Sunburn symptoms tend to worsen within 24 to 36 hours, and it can take anywhere from days to weeks, depending on the severity of the burn, to feel better.

Sunburns are classified into two degrees:

- **First-degree sunburn:** First-degree sunburns damage only the top layer of skin, the epidermis.
 - Symptoms include red, dry, irritated skin that might be hot to the touch. These burns typically resolve within three to five days.
- **Second-degree sunburn:** Second-degree sunburn penetrates the epidermis and reaches the layer beneath, called the dermis.
 - Symptoms include deep red skin, swelling and blistering, pain and discomfort. You also may experience fever and nausea. Second-degree sunburns take longer to heal and increase your risk of developing skin cancer.

Sunburn First Aid

Once sunburn occurs, you can't do much to limit damage to your skin. But the following tips might reduce your pain, swelling and discomfort:

- **Take a pain reliever.** For pain relief take an over-the-counter pain reliever, such as ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin IB or others) or naproxen sodium (Aleve) as soon as possible after sun exposure. Some pain relievers are gels that you apply to your skin.

- **Cool the skin.** Apply to the affected skin a clean towel dampened with cool tap water. Or take a cool bath with added baking soda – about 2 ounces (60 grams) per tub. Cool the skin several times a day.
- **Apply a moisturizer, lotion or gel.** An aloe vera lotion or gel or calamine lotion can be soothing.
- **Drink water** to replace fluid loss and prevent dehydration.
- **Don't break intact blisters.** If a blister does break, clean it with mild soap and water. Then apply an antibiotic ointment to the wound and cover it with a nonstick bandage.
- **Treat peeling skin gently.** Within a few days, the affected area may begin to peel. This is your body's way of getting rid of the top layer of damaged skin. While your skin is peeling, continue to moisturize.
- **Take an anti-itch drug.** An oral antihistamine, such as diphenhydramine, may help relieve itching as the skin begins to peel and heal underneath.
- **Apply a corticosteroid cream.** For mild to moderate sunburn, apply over-the-counter corticosteroid cream to the affected area.
- **Protect your sunburn from further sun exposure.** While your skin heals, stay out of the sun, or protect your skin if you do go out.
- **Avoid applying '-caine' products, such as benzocaine.** Such creams can irritate the skin or cause an allergic reaction. Benzocaine has been linked to a rare but potentially deadly condition that decreases the amount of oxygen that the blood can carry (methemoglobinemia).

Other Protections

In addition to wearing sunscreen, there are other ways to stay "sun safe" and protect your skin from sun damage, including:

- **Wear protective clothing.** When you're out in the sun, wear a wide-brimmed hat and as much clothing as you comfortably can to protect as much skin as possible. Consider clothing with integrated UV protection during prolonged sun exposure.
- **Wear sunglasses.** Sunglasses should be used to protect your eyes from sun damage. Look for sunglasses that block both UVA and UVB rays.
- **Spend time in the shade.** Limit direct exposure to the sun, particularly between 10:00 am and 4:00 pm, when UV rays are the strongest.
- **Check your skin.** Get to know your skin so you can be aware of any changes. Look for new moles, bumps, scaly spots or patches of discoloration. Speak with your doctor if you notice any sudden changes.
- **Sunburns can happen year-round.** Many people assume that wintertime means they don't need to wear sunscreen, particularly in colder climates. But sunburns can occur even while engaging in winter sports like skiing, so wear sunscreen year-round, no matter where you live.

DO NOT use benzocaine in children younger than age 2 without supervision from a healthcare professional. If you're an adult, never use more than the recommended dose and consider speaking with your doctor before using it.

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