

# A focus on Sunburn

## Protect your skin from our powerful sun

Sunburn is caused from over-exposure to the harmful ultraviolet rays of the sun. While the symptoms (such as red skin that is painful to the touch) are usually temporary, the skin damage is often permanent and can cause serious long-term health effects, including skin cancer, pigmentation, and premature aging. In addition to the skin, eyes can get burned from sun exposure; sunburned eyes turn red, dry, and painful, and can feel gritty.

Sunburn results when the amount of exposure to the sun or other ultraviolet light source exceeds the ability of the body's protective pigment, melanin, to protect the skin. Sunburn in a very light-skinned person may occur in less than 15 minutes of midday sun exposure, while a dark skinned person may tolerate the same exposure for hours.

Sunlight contains an invisible form of radiation called ultraviolet (UV) rays. UV A and possibly UV B can harm skin, connective tissue and increase risk for developing skin cancer. Certain drugs such as some blood pressure medication, antibiotics, and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs increase sensitivity to sunlight and the risk of getting sunburn.

### SYMPTOMS

The first signs of a sunburn may not appear for a few hours. The full effect to your skin may not appear for 24 hours or longer. Possible symptoms include:

- Red, tender skin that is warm to touch. (1st degree burn)
- Blisters that develop hours to days later. (2nd degree burn)
- Severe reactions (sometimes called "sun poisoning"), including fever, chills, nausea, or rash.
- Skin peeling on sunburned areas several days after the sunburn.

### FIRST AID

- Try taking a cool bath or shower. Or place wet, cold wash cloths on the burn for 10 to 15 minutes, several times a day. You can mix baking soda in the water to help relieve the pain. Small children may become easily chilled, so keep the water tepid.
- Apply a soothing lotion to the skin.
- Aloe gel is a common household remedy for sunburns. Aloe contains active compounds that help stop pain and inflammation of the skin.
- Over-the-counter steroid cream can also be applied several times a day.
- Over-the-counter pain medication, such as nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, or NSAIDs, including aspirin, may be helpful, and are excellent for reducing burn inflammation whereas Tylenol only reduces pain, not the burn itself.



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# Keeping your skin safe

## DO NOT

- **DO NOT** give aspirin to children.
- **DO NOT** apply petroleum jelly, benzocaine, lidocaine, or butter to the sunburn. They make the symptoms worse and can prevent healing.
- **DO NOT** wash burned skin with harsh soap.

## SKIN CANCER AWARENESS - See a doctor if you have:

- Moles that have irregular borders, asymmetric shape, variable color, or grow bigger than a pencil eraser.
- Sores that bleed and do not heal, are itchy or are painful.
- Red patches, lumps or new moles

## PREVENTION

- Avoid sun exposure during hours of peak sun ray intensity. Working outdoors during the summer, especially between 10 AM and 4 PM, increases the chances of getting sunburned. Exposure to certain conditions such as snow and light-colored sand also allow UV light to reflect and increase the risk of sunburn.
- Apply generous amounts of sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 15 or higher; SPF rating applies to preventing skin reddening and protects against UV B exposure. SPF does not relate to UV A protection unless specifically labeled to do so. Pay special attention to your face, nose, ears, and shoulders. Since sunscreen loses its potency over time, products over 1 - 2 years old should be discarded. The higher the SPF, the greater the protection.
- Apply sunscreen 20 minutes prior to sun exposure to allow penetration. Re-apply after swimming and every 2 hours while you are outdoors.
- Wear sun hats with a wide brim to shade face including the ears and back of neck. There is also SPF clothing and swimwear available.
- Wear sunglasses with UV protection.
- Use a lip balm with sunscreen.

## MORE TIPS

1. **Drink plenty of fluids.** During hot weather you will need to increase your fluid intake, regardless of your activity level. Don't wait until you're thirsty to drink.
2. **Schedule outdoor activities carefully.** If you must be outdoors, try to limit your outdoor activity to morning and evening hours. Try to rest often in shady areas so that your body's thermostat will have a chance to recover.
3. **Pace yourself.** If you are not accustomed to working or exercising in a hot environment, start slowly and pick up the pace gradually. If exertion in the heat makes your heart pound and leaves you gasping for breath, STOP all activity.
4. **Adjust to the environment.** Be aware that any sudden change in temperature, such as an early summer heat wave, will be stressful to your body. You will have a greater tolerance for heat if you limit your physical activity until you become accustomed to the heat.

## References

Auerbach PS. Wilderness Medicine. 4th ed. St. Louis, Mo: Mosby; 2001.

Rakel P, ed. Conn's Current Therapy 2005. 57th ed. Philadelphia, Pa: Saunders; 2005.



For more information, check out:

[www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/uvradiation](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/uvradiation)