

# Sunburn

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## Topic Overview

Sunlight can help our mental outlook and help us feel healthier. For people who have arthritis, the sun's warmth can help relieve some of their physical pain. Many people also think that a suntan makes a person look young and healthy. But sunlight can be harmful to the skin, causing immediate problems as well as problems that may develop years later.

A sunburn is skin damage from the sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays. Most sunburns cause mild pain and redness but affect only the outer layer of skin (first-degree burn). The red skin might hurt when you touch it. These sunburns are mild and can usually be treated at home.

Skin that is red and painful and that swells up and blisters may mean that deep skin layers and nerve endings have been damaged (second-degree burn). This type of sunburn is usually more painful and takes longer to heal.

Other problems that can be present along with sunburn include:

- Heatstroke or other heat-related illnesses from too much sun exposure.
- Allergic reactions to sun exposure, sunscreen products, or medicines.
- Vision problems, such as burning pain, decreased vision, or partial or complete vision loss.

Long-term problems include:

- An increased chance of having skin cancer.
- An increase in the number of cold sores.
- An increase in problems related to a health condition, such as lupus.
- Cataracts, from not protecting your eyes from direct or indirect sunlight over many years. Cataracts are one of the leading causes of blindness.
- Skin changes, such as premature wrinkling or brown spots.

Your skin type affects how easily you become sunburned. People with fair or freckled skin, blond or red hair, and blue eyes usually sunburn easily.

Although people with darker skin don't sunburn as easily, they can still get skin cancer. So it's important to use sun protection, no matter what your skin color is.

Your age also affects how your skin reacts to the sun. The skin of children younger than 6 and adults older than 60 is more sensitive to sunlight.

You may get a more severe sunburn depending on:

- The time of day. You are more likely to get a sunburn between 10 in the morning and 4 in the afternoon, when the sun's rays are the strongest. You might think the chance of getting a sunburn on cloudy days is less, but the sun's damaging UV light can pass through clouds.
- Whether you are near reflective surfaces, such as water, white sand, concrete, snow, and ice. All of these reflect the sun's rays and can cause sunburns.
- The season of the year. The position of the sun on summer days can cause a more severe sunburn.
- Altitude. It is easy to get sunburned at higher altitudes, because there is less of the earth's atmosphere to block the sunlight. UV exposure increases about 4% for every 1000 ft (305 m) gain in elevation.
- How close you are to the equator (latitude). The closer you are to the equator, the more direct sunlight passes through the atmosphere. For example, the southern United States gets 1.5 times more sunlight than the northern United States.
- The UV index of the day, which shows the risk of getting a sunburn that day.

Preventive measures and home treatment are usually all that is needed to prevent or treat a sunburn.

- Protect your skin from the sun.
- Do not stay in the sun too long.
- Use sunscreens, and wear clothing that covers your skin.

If you have any health risks that may increase the seriousness of sun exposure, you should avoid being in the sun from 10 in the morning to 4 in the afternoon.

Check your symptoms to decide if and when you should see a doctor.

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## Home Treatment

Home treatment measures may provide some relief from a mild sunburn.

- Use cool cloths on sunburned areas.
- Take frequent cool showers or baths.

- Apply soothing lotions that contain aloe vera to sunburned areas. Topical steroids (such as 1% hydrocortisone cream) may also help with sunburn pain and swelling. **Note:** Do not use the cream on children younger than age 2 unless your doctor tells you to. Do not use in the rectal or vaginal area in children younger than age 12 unless your doctor tells you to.

A sunburn can cause a mild fever and a headache. Lie down in a cool, quiet room to relieve the headache. A headache may be caused by dehydration, so drinking fluids may help. For more information, see the topic Dehydration.

There is little you can do to stop skin from peeling after a sunburn—it is part of the healing process. Lotion may help relieve the itching.

Other home treatment measures, such as chamomile, may help relieve your sunburn symptoms.

### **Medicine you can buy without a prescription**

#### **Try a nonprescription medicine to help treat your fever or pain:**

- Acetaminophen, such as Tylenol
- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs):
  - Ibuprofen, such as Advil or Motrin
  - Naproxen, such as Aleve or Naprosyn
- Aspirin (also a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug), such as Bayer or Bufferin

Talk to your child's doctor before switching back and forth between doses of acetaminophen and ibuprofen. When you switch between two medicines, there is a chance your child will get too much medicine.

### **Safety tips**

#### **Be sure to follow these safety tips when you use a nonprescription medicine:**

- Carefully read and follow all directions on the medicine bottle and box.
- Do not take more than the recommended dose.
- Do not take a medicine if you have had an allergic reaction to it in the past.
- If you have been told to avoid a medicine, call your doctor before you take it.
- If you are or could be pregnant, do not take any medicine other than acetaminophen unless your doctor has told you to.
- Do not give aspirin to anyone younger than age 20 unless your doctor tells you to.

## **Care of blisters**

Home treatment may help decrease pain, prevent infection, and help the skin heal.

- A small, unbroken blister about the size of a pea, even a blood blister, will usually heal on its own. Use a loose bandage to protect it. Avoid the activity that caused the blister.
- If a small blister is on a weight-bearing area like the bottom of the foot, protect it with a doughnut-shaped moleskin pad (See figure 1 in appendix) . Leave the area over the blister open.
- If a blister is large and painful, it may be best to drain it. Here is a safe method:
  - Wipe a needle with rubbing alcohol.
  - Gently puncture the edge of the blister.
  - Press the fluid in the blister toward the hole so it can drain out.
  - If you have a condition such as diabetes, HIV, cancer, or heart disease, you do not want to drain a blister because of the risk of infection.
- After you have opened a blister, or if it has torn open:
  - Gently wash the area with clean water. Do not use alcohol, iodine, or any other cleanser.
  - Don't remove the flap of skin over a blister unless it's very dirty or torn or there is pus under it. Gently smooth the flap over the tender skin.
  - You may cover the blister with a thin layer of petroleum jelly, such as Vaseline, and a nonstick bandage.
  - Apply more petroleum jelly and replace the bandage as needed.

**Watch for a skin infection** while your blister is healing. Signs of infection include:

- Increased pain, swelling, redness, or warmth around the blister.
- Red streaks extending away from the blister.
- Drainage of pus from the blister.
- Fever.

## Symptoms to watch for during home treatment

Call your doctor if any of the following occur during home treatment:

- Vision problems continue after you get out of the sun.
- Fever develops.
- Dehydration develops and you are unable to drink enough to replace lost fluids.
- Signs of skin infection in blisters develop.
- Symptoms become more severe or more frequent.

## Prevention

### Protecting your skin

Use the following tips to protect your skin from the sun. You may decrease your chances of developing skin cancer and help prevent wrinkles.

### Avoid sun exposure

The best way to prevent a sunburn is to avoid sun exposure.

Stay out of the midday sun (from 10 in the morning to 4 in the afternoon), which is the strongest sunlight. Find shade if you need to be outdoors. You can also calculate how much ultraviolet (UV) exposure you are getting by using the shadow rule: A shadow that

is longer than you are means UV exposure is low; a shadow that is shorter than you are means the UV exposure is high.

Other ways to protect yourself from the sun include wearing protective clothing, such as:

- Hats with wide 4 in. (10 cm) brims that cover your neck, ears, eyes, and scalp.
- Sunglasses with UV ray protection, to prevent eye damage.
- Loose-fitting, tightly woven clothing that covers your arms and legs.
- Clothing made with sun protective fabric. These clothes have a special label that tells you how effective they are in protecting your skin from ultraviolet rays.

## Preventing sun exposure in children

You should start protecting your child from the sun when he or she is a baby.

- It's safest to keep babies younger than 6 months out of the sun.
- Teach children the ABCs of how to protect their skin from getting sunburned.
  - **A = Away.** Stay away from the sun as much as possible from 10 in the morning until 4 in the afternoon. Find shade if you need to be outdoors.
  - **B = Block.** Use a sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 30 or higher to protect babies' and children's very sensitive skin.
  - **C = Cover up.** Wear clothing that covers the skin, hats with wide brims, and sunglasses with UV protection. Even children 1 year old should wear sunglasses with UV protection.

## Sunscreen protection

If you can't avoid being in the sun, use a sunscreen to help protect your skin while you are in the sun.

Be sure to read the information on the sunscreen label about the SPF factor listed on the label and how much protection it gives your skin. Follow the directions on the label for applying the sunscreen so it is most effective in protecting your skin from the sun's ultraviolet rays.

## Choosing a sunscreen

- Sunscreens come in lotions, gels, creams, ointments, and sprays. Use a sunscreen that:
  - Has a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 30 or higher.
  - Says "broad-spectrum" that protects the skin from ultraviolet A and B (UVA and UVB) rays.
- Use lip balm or cream that has SPF of 30 or higher to protect your lips from getting sunburned.
- Take extra care to protect your skin when you're near water, at higher elevations, or in tropical climates.

Sunscreens labeled "water-resistant" are made to protect people while they are swimming or sweating. The label will say if the sunscreen will protect you for 40 minutes or 80 minutes.

## Applying a sunscreen

- Apply the sunscreen at least 15 to 30 minutes before going in the sun.
- Apply sunscreen to all the skin that will be exposed to the sun, including the nose, ears, neck, scalp, and lips. Sunscreen needs to be applied evenly over the skin and in the amount recommended on the label. Most sunscreens are not completely effective because they are not applied correctly. It usually takes about 1 fl oz (30 mL) to cover an adult's body.
- Apply sunscreen every 2 to 3 hours while in the sun and after swimming or sweating a lot. The SPF value decreases if a person sweats heavily or is in water, because water on the skin reduces the amount of protection the sunscreen provides.

## Other sunscreen tips

Remember that skin that is healing from a sunburn is sensitive to more damage from the sun, so be sure to prevent more sunburn in those areas. The following tips about sunscreen will help you use it more effectively:

- If your skin is sensitive to skin products or you have had a skin reaction (allergic reaction) to a sunscreen, use a sunscreen that is free of chemicals, para-aminobenzoic acid (PABA), preservatives, perfumes, and alcohol.
- If you are going to have high exposure to the sun, consider using a physical sunscreen, such as zinc oxide, which will stop most of the sunlight from reaching the skin.
- If you need to use sunscreen and insect repellent with DEET, do not use a product that combines the two. You can apply sunscreen first and then apply the insect repellent with DEET, but the sunscreen needs to be reapplied every 2 hours.

Do not use tanning booths to get a tan. Artificial tanning devices can cause skin damage and increase the risk of skin cancer. If you want your skin to look tan, try a sunless tanning cream or spray that makes your skin look tan. And keep using sunscreen when you are in the sun.

For information on sun exposure and vitamin D, see [Getting Enough Vitamin D](#).

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## Preparing For Your Appointment

**To prepare for your appointment, see the topic [Making the Most of Your Appointment](#).**

You can help your doctor diagnose and treat your condition by being prepared to answer the following questions:

- What are your main symptoms?
- How long have you had your symptoms?
- Do you have blisters?
- What amount of time did you spend in the sun? Were you at a high altitude?
- Did you use sunscreen or sunblock, and what SPF was used?
- Have you had this problem before? If so, do you know what caused the problem at that time? How was it treated?
- What activities make your symptoms better or worse?
- What prescription or nonprescription medicines do you take?
- What home treatment measures have you tried? Did they help?
- What nonprescription medicines have you tried? Did they help?

- Do you have any health risks?
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## Related Information

- Heat-Related Illnesses
  - Skin Changes
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## Credits for Sunburn

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## Appendix

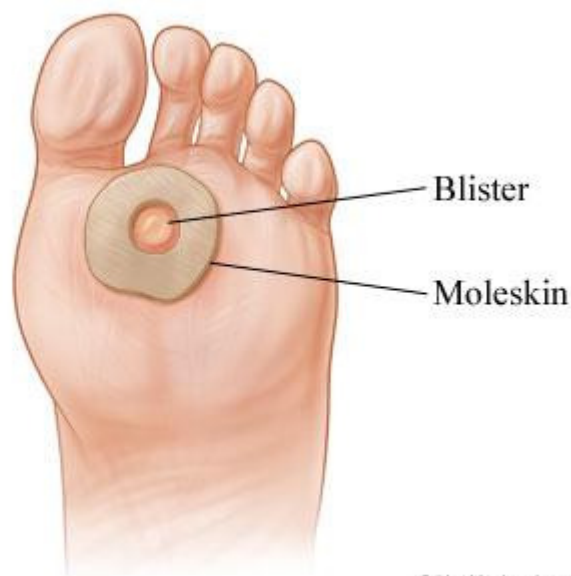
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### Topic Images

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Figure 1

#### How to Treat a Blister



If the blister is in an area where pressure is applied, such as on the bottom of your foot, protect it with a doughnut-shaped moleskin pad. Leave the area over the blister open.

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Note: The "printer friendly" document will not contain all the information available in the online document. Some information (e.g. cross-references to other topics, definitions or medical illustrations) is only available in the online version.

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