

Sunburn

What is sunburn?

Sunburn is the redness, soreness, itching, and sometimes blistering that occurs after your skin has too much exposure to the ultraviolet (UV) rays of the sun or a sunlamp.

What is the cause?

You may become sunburned when:

- You stay out in the sun too long without enough protection from sunscreen or clothing.
- You are in the sun when sunlight is most intense, usually between the hours of 10 AM to 4 PM.
- You take medicines that make your skin more sensitive to the sun.
- You live or travel in an area where sunlight is more intense, such as in the tropics or at high altitude, or you are exposed to reflection of sunlight from water or snow.

It doesn't have to be hot or even sunny for you to become sunburned. You can get sunburned when it's cloudy.

What are the symptoms?

One of the problems with sunburn is that you may not have any symptoms until a few hours after you have been burned. The symptoms are:

- Redness
- A feeling of heat
- Mild to severe pain to the touch
- Blisters in severe cases

Within a couple of days, your skin may itch. In about a week the skin may peel.

There is a form of severe sunburn called sun poisoning. It appears to be a total body reaction to the sunburn. It can cause symptoms of fever and chills, nausea, headache, dehydration, and lightheadedness.

How is it treated?

It may help to:

- Soak in a cool bath. It may help to add bath products containing oatmeal to help decrease itching and the burned feeling.
- Put cool, moist cloths on the sunburned skin several times a day.
- Take an anti-inflammatory medicine, such as aspirin, ibuprofen, or naproxen. It will help the sunburn be less painful. It may also lessen the damage to your

skin, especially if you start taking it when you first suspect you are sunburned.

- Check with your healthcare provider before you give any medicine that contains aspirin or salicylates to a child or teen. This includes medicines like baby aspirin, some cold medicines, and Pepto-Bismol. Children and teens who take aspirin are at risk for a serious illness called Reye's syndrome.
- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medicines (NSAIDs) may cause stomach bleeding and other problems. These risks increase with age. Read the label and take as directed. Unless recommended by your healthcare provider, do not take for more than 10 days for any reason.
- Put aloe vera lotion or another moisturizing lotion on your skin 3 times a day until your skin looks normal again.
- Put calamine lotion on your skin to lessen the itching.
- Take antihistamine tablets, such as Benadryl, for itching. Taking the tablets may make you drowsy. Do not drive or operate machinery or equipment while you are taking this medicine.
- Use hydrocortisone cream up to 4 times a day on the burned area to help relieve redness, burning, and itching.

If you have just a few shallow blisters, treat them like a minor household burn. You can apply some antibiotic ointment, such as bacitracin, and then cover the blistered area with a bandage.

Don't try to open the blisters. Let them open on their own, when the underlying skin can better protect itself from infection.

If you are not sure about how severe your blisters are or whether they are becoming infected, check with your healthcare provider. Signs of infection are increased redness or pain, and yellow discharge from the blisters.

If you think you may have sun poisoning, you should follow the treatment for sunburn. Be sure to also drink plenty of fluids, such as water, juice, and tea. Don't drink alcohol.

How long will the effects last?

The symptoms of sunburn usually worsen 24 to 48 hours after you are burned. The symptoms gradually go away over the next few days.

Sunburn causes long-term damage to the skin. Redness alone is the same as a first-degree burn. Redness with blistering is a second-degree burn. Both types of sunburn are harmful to the skin and over time increase the risk of skin cancer. Blistering burns increase the risk of malignant skin cancer (melanoma) by several times. This is especially true if you have severe sunburns 3 or more times when you are a teen or young adult.

Too much sun exposure, even without sunburn, also causes the skin to age faster. Wrinkles, sagging, and brown sunspots develop at an earlier age.

When should I call my healthcare provider?

Call your provider if you have any of the following symptoms:

- You have a headache and fever that are not getting better with acetaminophen or an anti-inflammatory medicine.
- Most of your skin is covered with blisters.
- You have pain that is getting worse 1 to 2 days after the sunburn.
- You have yellow or green pus draining from the blisters.
- You have red streaking from blisters toward the center of your body (a sign of worsening infection).
- Your face is swollen.
- You have confusion or disorientation.
- You are not making much urine or your urine is dark colored.

How can I help prevent sunburn?

There are many ways and many products to prevent sunburn. To prevent sunburn:

- Don't stay out in the sun for a long time, especially if you are fair skinned and burn easily. Remember that you can become sunburned even on cloudy days and even if you are a brown-skinned person.
- Try to stay out of the sun during the times of most intense rays, usually 10 AM to 4 PM.
- Use sunscreen with an SPF (sun protection factor) of 15 or greater. The lighter your skin, the higher the SPF you need. Healthcare providers recommend an SPF of at least 30 if you are very fair skinned. Use a broad-spectrum sunscreen that protects against both UVA and UVB rays. It's best to put the sunscreen on your skin 30 to 60 minutes before you go out into the sun. Put sunscreen on your skin every 3 to 4 hours while you are in the sun. If you are playing in water or sweating a lot, put more sunscreen on every hour or two.
- Protect the lips with a product that contains PABA.
- You may want to use zinc oxide ointment on a sunburned nose to completely block the sun's rays.
- Wear protective clothing: hat, sleeved shirt, and long pants.
- Be especially careful if you are at high altitude or vacationing in the tropics, or if the sun's rays are being reflected by water, sand, snow, or concrete.
- Do not use sunlamps or tanning booths. They are promoted as using mostly ultraviolet A (UVA), but both UVA and ultraviolet B (UVB) cause skin damage. UVA actually penetrates more deeply into the skin than UVB. Both UVA and UVB cause sunburn, aging of the skin, and skin cancer. A tanning booth "pre-tan" does not protect against sunburn if you are traveling to an area of intense sun (which can include high-altitude mountains as well as tropical beaches).

Sunlight also damages the eyes and increases your risk for certain types of vision loss or blindness when you get older. Wear sunglasses that provide 100% UV ray protection.

Developed by RelayHealth.

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