

Avoiding Outdoor Itch

- [Summer Without Sunburn](#)
- [Cuts and Scrapes](#)
- [Anatomy of an Itch](#)
- [Treating Poison Ivy](#)
- [Summer Skin Hazards](#)
- [Facts About Mosquito Bites](#)
- [Plants That Cut and Scrape](#)
- [Slideshow: Spotting Poison Ivy](#)
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Avoiding Outdoor Itch – Or Relieving It

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Summer Without Sunburn

WebMD Feature

By Ellen Greenlaw

Reviewed By Louise Chang, MD

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Bright red, tender skin is often the mark of a summer day spent outdoors. But sunburn is not a healthy glow. It's a sign of skin damage that can lead to premature aging and skin cancer. Even if you "tan, don't burn," you're inviting trouble, says David Lefell, MD.

"Any amount of unprotected sun exposure is damaging to your skin," says Lefell, professor of dermatology and surgery at the Yale School of Medicine and author of *Total Skin*. "Even a tan is a sign that your skin has been injured by ultraviolet (UV) rays."

Over time, sun exposure can cause a range of skin damage, from age spots and wrinkles to skin cancers, including basal cell carcinoma and melanoma. "I tell people that if they're not worried about cancer, they should at least protect their skin for vanity's sake," Lefell says.

But it is possible to enjoy the summer -- and even the summer sun -- without burning. By learning a bit about how sun damage happens and taking a few simple precautions, you can enjoy a summer free of sunburn.

How Sunburn Happens

Your body's protective pigment, called melanin, can only protect your skin from the sun for a certain amount of time before your skin begins to burn. The more melanin in your skin, the more protection you have.

"Those with very light skin, hair, and eyes may burn in as little as 5 minutes, while someone with very dark skin may be able to stay in the sun for a few hours without burning," says Arielle Kauvar, MD. Kauvar is the director of New York Laser and Skin Care in New York City and clinical professor of dermatology at New York University School of Medicine.

Choosing and Applying Sunscreen

The most important way to protect your skin from sun damage is to wear sunscreen on all exposed areas of your body. That's important year-round, not just in summer.

Kauvar recommends applying a separate sunscreen, even if your makeup or moisturizer has sunscreen in it, especially during summer months.

Here are a couple of tips to keep in mind when buying sunscreen:

- Look for a sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 30 or higher.
- Choose a sunscreen that is waterproof or water resistant. You'll still need to reapply it after being in the water, but a waterproof sunscreen should maintain its SPF level at least 80 minutes after exposure to water, and a water-resistant sunscreen clocks in at 40 minutes after exposure to water.
- Look for a sunscreen that offers protection from UVA and UVB rays. These sunscreens are labeled "broad-spectrum." Ingredients to look for include ecamsule, oxybenzone, and avobenzone. Titanium dioxide and zinc oxide will do the trick too, and may be a good choice for people with sensitive skin.
- Choose a sunscreen that you like. That will help you remember to use it. Sunscreens are now available in creams, sprays, lotions, and foams, so there are plenty of options to choose from.

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Summer Without Sunburn (continued)

Choosing and Applying Sunscreen continued...

But picking the right sunscreen is only half the equation. You also need to use it correctly. If you think you only need to apply sunscreen when you're at the beach or on sunny days, think again. "It's good to get in the habit of applying sunscreen every day," says Kauvar. "Most people get more sun exposure in the course of a day than they realize, even when it's overcast."

Kauvar recommends these tips to get the most sun protection out of your sunscreen:

- Apply the sunscreen about 30 minutes before you plan to go outside. This gives the sunscreen time to be absorbed by your skin.
- Be generous. The general rule of thumb is about one ounce for each application, and you'll want to cover all exposed areas of the body. Some often-missed spots include the ears, the feet, and any area of the scalp where the hair is thin. And don't forget the edges and straps of bathing suits, a common place for burns.
- Reapply the sunscreen every two hours or after swimming or sweating heavily.

Other Prevention Tips

Wearing sunscreen is a must for summer months. But it's not the only way to help prevent skin damage while enjoying the great outdoors. Here are some other suggestions:

Wear a hat. A wide-brimmed hat will help keep the sun off your head, face, and the back of your neck. For the best protection, choose a hat with a tight weave.

Choose clothing carefully. Wearing dark-colored clothing with a tight weave can also limit sun exposure. The darker the color and tighter the weave, the more protection the clothing offers. "A white T-shirt has an SPF factor of about 4," says Kauvar. "And if it gets wet at the beach or pool, it offers almost no sun protection." Consider wearing a darker-colored cover-up at the beach or pool instead.

Avoid peak hours. The sun's rays are strongest from about 10 a.m. until 4 p.m. A good rule of thumb is to limit your time in the sun when your shadow is shorter than you are.

Seek the shade. Enjoy the outdoors from under the shade of a cabana or a row of trees. Because the sun's rays reflect off sand and water, it's a good idea to use multiple umbrellas or a larger shade structure while at the beach or pool. "The more sunlight you can see reflected around you, the more indirect sun you're getting," says Kauvar.

Protect your eyes. The delicate skin of the eyelids is a common place for skin cancer. And excessive sun exposure can also lead to cataracts. Choose a pair of sunglasses with 100% UVA and UVB protection rating to protect your eyes from the sun's damage. Wraparound styles offer the most protection.

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Other Prevention Tips continued...

Watch your back. It can be hard to keep sunscreen on while you're swimming, which can leave your back and other parts of your body unprotected. Some companies now make swimwear and clothing that protect from UV rays. These suits and shirts may be especially good for young children who are in and out of the water often.

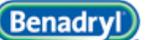
Don't forget your lips. Lips can burn too, and they are another common area for skin cancer. "We're beginning to see many more cases of actinic cheilitis, a pre-cancerous condition usually on the bottom lip caused by sun exposure," says Leffell. Protect your lips by choosing a lip balm with an SPF of 30 or higher, and apply it every two hours while you're in the sun.

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