

# Sunburn First Aid: How To Avoid It and How To Treat It

June 10, 2019 | First Aid Supplies Online  
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Most people would agree that relaxing on the beach is one of the highlights of summer vacation or weekend excursions. But it would be almost impossible not to know at this point, considering the amount of public education, that certain lengths of Ultraviolet (UV) light from the sun cause sunburn, premature aging of the skin, and have potentially cancerous outcomes.

The human body requires sunlight to produce **Vitamin D**, which is important for bone health, regulating blood pressure, reducing risk of Type 2 diabetes, and protection against some types of cancer. So it's important to get a little bit of sunlight on your skin on a regular basis. But you should know how much sun is too much and aim to never get a sunburn.



This nasty sunburn may lead to dark spots, lesions, premature aging, and other skin conditions later in this woman's life.

## What exactly causes sunburn?

Sunburn is caused when UVA and UVB rays of the sun damage a cell's DNA. Once damaged, the skin cell usually dies and is replaced with a new cell. **Melanin**, which is made by your skin and gives it its color, is contained in the outer layers of your skin and protects you against sunburn. Largely influenced by your ancestry, some of us have loads of melanin, some very little.

To protect the skin, melanin absorbs UV light and disperses it as heat. The more skin damage that occurs, the more melanin is produced, and this is what causes you to tan. But many of us, especially fair-skinned people, have a limited amount of melanin – when it's exhausted, your skin can't defend against UV rays and turns red and painful. This inflammatory reaction is sunburn.

**The question for most people is, how much sun is too much? It's usually too late in the day and with a painful sunburn when you discover this fact.**

**Live Science** has an excellent guide on The Fitzpatrick Scale, which dermatologists use to determine how long people of certain skin types can spend in the sun without getting a sunburn. It's remarkable how quickly a sunburn can occur in fair-skinned people:

- **Type 1 skin always burns and never tans, which is typical of redheads and platinum blondes.** These people can spend a maximum of 67 minutes, unprotected, in the sun divided by the UV index at that time. (So, if the UV index is 12, the person can spend 5.58 minutes in the sun, unprotected, before burning.)
- **Type 2 skin burns easily, but tans with difficulty.** This is usually typical of blondes and those who are blue-eyed. Skin type 2 can spend a maximum of 100 minutes divided by the UV index in the sun without burning. (8.33 minutes)
- **Type 3 skin rarely burns and tans easily.** This skin type usually belongs to those with brown or black hair and those with brown eyes. Skin type 3 can spend a maximum of 200 minutes divided by the UV index in the sun without burning. (16.66 minutes)
- **Type 4 skin burns sometimes and tans easily.** These people are usually of Mediterranean, Spanish or Indian decent. Skin type 4 can spend a maximum of 300 minutes divided by the UV index in the sun without burning. (25 minutes)
- **Type 5 skin is dark brown and never burns, but tans easily.** This is typical of darker Indian skin and some North African skin.
- **Type 6 is skin that has a lot of melanin and does not burn.** This skin also tans easily, though it is hard to see since the skin is already so dark.

The UV Index indicates the risk of getting a sunburn given the time of day and your location. Cloud cover also comes into play, proximity to reflective surfaces like sand and water, the season of the year (late spring and early summer are the most intense), altitude, and proximity to the equator.

## How to avoid sunburn

Any length of time in the sun is too much for those who have very fair skin and they should use **sunscreen of SPF 30 or higher** or sunblock every time they're outdoors. Age also affects how your skin reacts to sunlight, especially in those older than 60 and under six – sunblock should be the rule for these. Those who have any kind of pre-cancerous skin conditions or prematurely aged skin shouldn't expose their skin at all to sunlight. Certain medications can create photosensitivity as can certain genetic conditions.

Other tips to avoid sunburn:

- Stay out of the sun when UV rays are the strongest, between 10am-2pm
- Cover up with a hat to protect your head, face, neck, and shoulders.
- Wear sunscreen from the moment you leave the house until you return. Reapply every 2 hours (your kids will protest but they'll thank you when they're 40).
- Wear sunglasses to protect your eyes
- 80% of UV rays penetrate cloud cover, so just because it's a little cloudy, it doesn't mean you won't burn.

## Tips for treating sunburn

- As soon as you realize you have a sunburn, start treating it. First, get out of the sun immediately and stay out of the sun until the sunburn heals.
- Soak in cool water to reduce your skin temperature – this will offer considerable relief. Use a moisturizer multiple times daily to help the skin retain moisture and prevent it from further drying. Moisturizing may also help to relieve the itchiness as it heals.
- Do not peel your skin as the sunburn heals, let it fall off naturally.
- **Hydrocortisone cream** can help ease the discomfort along with over the counter pain medications like **ibuprofen** or **aspirin**. You can also use **heat absorbing gel** to reduce discomfort.
- Drink lots of water to hydrate the skin and your body. A sunburn demands lots of water to heal and will draw it from wherever is available in your body.
- If you received a very serious sunburn and the skin is blistered and still remains painful after a few days, have chills, or if you have a fever over 101, see your doctor.

Avoid sunburn as much as possible, as intense, repeated exposure to sunburn increases your risk of more serious skin damage and certain diseases, including dry skin, wrinkles, dark spots, and skin cancers such as melanoma.

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