

Sun Safety: Myths vs. Facts

Myth vs. Fact

The sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays can harm your skin, leading to skin cancer, sunburn, and early signs of aging. According to the American Cancer Society, skin cancer is the most common type of cancer and 1 in 5 Americans will be diagnosed with skin cancer at some point in their life. You can protect yourself from the sun by:

- staying out of the sun, especially from 10 AM to 4 PM when the sun is the strongest.
- wearing long, tightly woven clothing with a hat and sunglasses to cover your skin.
- wearing sunscreen whenever spending time outdoors.

Wearing sunscreen can reduce your risk of squamous cell carcinoma by 40% and melanoma by 50%. There are many misconceptions about the safety of sunscreen. Here are some common sunscreen myths.

Myth: Wearing sunscreen is unsafe.

Fact: Sunscreen decreases the risk of cancer and prevents sunburns. Wearing sunscreen reduces your risk of certain skin cancers by 40% to 50%.

Myth: I tan easily in the sun, so I don't need sunscreen.

Fact: Tanning is the body's response to UV damage and increases your risk of skin cancer and early aging. UV rays are radiation from the sun that causes sun burns, skin cancer, and early aging.

Myth: I don't need sunscreen because I have a darker skin tone.

Fact: Darker skin tones can still get sunburns and other skin damage including early skin aging. Regardless of skin tone, everyone should wear sunscreen.

Myth: I don't have to wear sunscreen on a cloudy, rainy, or snowy day.

Fact: Any time you are outside, you are being exposed to UV rays. Even on a cloudy day, 90% of the sun's UV rays can still reach your skin. Clouds only partially block UV rays and snow reflects UV rays.

Myth: Making your own sunscreen is as effective as buying sunscreen.

Fact: Making your own sunscreen is not effective. It will increase your risk of getting a sunburn.

The Best Sunscreen is the One You Will Wear

What to look for in a sunscreen?

The best sunscreen you can choose is one you will wear and have available to you. Here are four things to look for when choosing a sunscreen for the best protection.

1. **Use a lotion** instead of a spray. Lotion provides more protection than spray. Sprays can accidentally be inhaled.
2. Choose a sunscreen that is **SPF 30 or higher**.
3. Choose a **broad-spectrum** sunscreen to protect against both UVA and UVB rays. UVA has a longer wavelength and is associated with early aging. UVB has a shorter wavelength and is associated with sunburns.
4. Choose a **water-resistant** sunscreen that will stay on wet or sweaty skin for longer before you must reapply.

Chemicals in Sunscreen

Some people are worried about chemicals in sunscreen. There are two types of sunscreens: chemical sunscreen and mineral sunscreen. Both types of sunscreens are effective at reducing your risk of sunburns, skin cancer, and early signs of skin aging.

Chemical sunscreens absorb UV rays to protect the skin from the sun. They have active ingredients like octinoxate, oxybenzone, avobenzone, octocrylene, and homosalate.

Mineral sunscreens sit on top of your skin and protect you from the sun by reflecting UV rays. They have active ingredients like zinc oxide and titanium oxide.

Your body can absorb the active ingredients in chemical sunscreen. One study found oxybenzone, an active ingredient in many chemical sunscreens, in the urine of people who reported using sunscreen. Studies have shown these chemicals to be harmful in large amounts. The health effects of these chemicals in the amounts used in sunscreen are still unknown, but studies have shown that ingredients in chemical sunscreen, specifically octinoxate, can reduce your ability to break down harmful chemicals in the body. This causes the chemicals to stay in your body longer. The FDA has requested more research about the effects of using these active ingredients in chemical sunscreen. Additional sunscreen ingredients, like fragrances, can also cause skin allergies and contact dermatitis.

What can I do?

If you want to limit your exposure to chemicals in sunscreens, choose a mineral-based sunscreen and stay in the shade or cover up more often. Avoid applying sunscreen to broken skin (i.e. a cut, rash, a popped pimple).

Mineral sunscreens are considered safe and effective by the FDA. If your local store doesn't carry mineral-based sunscreen, ask if they can stock it. Wearing sunscreen is only one strategy for sun safety. Make sure to also seek shade and wear long clothing to protect yourself from the sun.