

## How to Treat and Prevent Sunburn

Sunburn is caused by overexposure of the skin to the ultraviolet (UV) rays of the sun or a sunlamp. Unfortunately the symptoms of sunburn do not begin until two to four hours after the sun's damage has been done. The peak reaction of redness, pain, and swelling does not occur for 24 hours.

Minor sunburn is a first-degree burn that turns the skin pink or red. Prolonged sun exposure can cause blistering and a second-degree burn. Repeated sun exposure and suntans cause premature aging of the skin (wrinkling, sagging, and brown sunspots). Repeated sunburns can also increase the risk of skin cancer in the damaged area. Each blistering sunburn doubles the risk of developing malignant melanoma, which is the most serious type of skin cancer.

The sensation of pain and heat will probably last for 48 hours. An ibuprofen product, such as Advil or Motrin, started early and continued for two days can reduce discomfort. Nonprescription 1% hydrocortisone cream or moisturizing creams applied three times each day may also cut down on swelling and pain, but only if used early. Apply these creams later if the sunburn becomes itchy. For broken blisters, trim off the dead skin with clean, fine scissors and apply an antibiotic ointment. Wash it off and reapply it twice daily for three days. Taking cool baths or applying cool, wet compresses to sunburned areas several times a day also helps relieve pain and burning. Adding 2 oz of baking soda to a tubful of water may help. Showers usually cause too much pain to be helpful. Encourage your child to drink extra fluids to replace the fluid lost into the swelling of sunburned skin and to prevent dehydration and dizziness. These measures are usually needed only during the first two days of the sunburn. Peeling usually occurs in about a week. Apply a moisturizing cream such as Aloe Vera. Encourage your child not to peel off the dried skin before the skin underneath is completely healed. DO NOT apply petrolatum or other ointments or butter to sunburns because they prevent heat and sweat from escaping from the skin and are painful to remove.

The best way to prevent skin cancer is to prevent sunburn. Although skin cancer occurs in adulthood, it is caused by lengthy sun exposure and sunburns during childhood. Every time you apply sunscreen to your child, you are helping to prevent skin cancer down the line. The simplest and safest approach is to use a sunscreen with an SPF-15 on all children. For practical purposes, an SPF higher than 30 is rarely helpful. Give special attention to the areas most likely to become sunburned, such as your child's nose, ears, cheeks, and shoulders. Apply sunscreen generously. A 'waterproof' sunscreen stays on for about 30 minutes in water. Some of the newer formulations stay on longer, but may severely burn if rubbed in the eyes. Take extra precautions for babies and fair-skinned children. The skin of infants is thinner and more sensitive to the sun than that of older children. In general, babies under 6 months of age should be kept out of the direct sun. If they must be outdoors, use sunscreens, clothing that covers the arms and legs, and a hat with a brim. Since more than 50% of skin cancer occurs on the face, wearing a baseball cap or other hat with a brim is important for children of all ages.

About 15% of white people have skin that never tans but only burns. Fair-skinned children who don't tan need to be extremely careful about the sun throughout their lives. The big risk factors for sunburn are red hair, blond hair, blue eyes, green eyes, or freckles. Children with these characteristics are also at increased risk for skin cancer. They need to be reminded repeatedly to use a sunscreen throughout the summer and to avoid the sun whenever possible.

Protect your child's eyes also. Long-term exposure to ultraviolet light increases the risk of cataracts. Buy sunglasses with lenses that absorb 99% to 100% of UV radiation. Look for labels that say "UV protection". Set a good example and use sunscreen and wear sunglasses yourself.