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How to treat sunburn at home

These days advice abounds about how to stay safe in the sun, and most people are careful to follow sun-safe guidelines. But even the most careful person may find themselves missing a sun cream application or staying a little too long in direct sunlight from time to time. This is why knowing how to treat sunburn at home is important.

While the onset of summer, with its blue skies and warmer weather, is welcomed by many, it's important to remember the steps needed to stay safe and well in hotter weather. If you or your child develop sore, red skin after sun exposure, there are several steps you can take to treat sunburn at home, minimise the damage, and speed up the healing process.

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Seek out shade

Often you're not aware that the sun is burning your skin until sunburn symptoms start to appear. But if you do notice your skin getting hot or sore, make sure you seek out the shade as soon as possible. "If you find yourself burning, it is paramount to get out of the sun to avoid further damage," advises Dr Najia Shaikh, GP and founder of [One Skin Clinic](#).

Cool the sunburnt area

The next step is to cool down the area. Depending on your circumstances and the size of the sunburnt skin, you may choose to apply a damp towel or take a cool bath or shower. Although this may feel a little uncomfortable, cooling the area will help to minimise damage.

Stay hydrated

It's also important to keep yourself hydrated. "I look at this as approaching and treating the burn from the inside out, as well as topically. [Heat stroke](#), fatigue and dehydration are often seen in conjunction with burning, so it is important to remain hydrated. This is applicable of course all summer, even if you don't burn," says Shaikh.

Take painkillers to alleviate sunburn pain

If you are in pain and are able to take [painkillers](#), over-the-counter pain relief or anti-inflammatory medicines such as paracetamol and ibuprofen will help to reduce soreness.

Soothe the sunburn

Finally, there are products designed for application after being in the sun. However, these are not specifically designed for sunburn treatment. They may however, help to moisturise affected areas. "Topically, you can apply an after-sun lotion, cream or spray. They often help cool the skin and re-administer any lost moisture the burning process has inflicted. I advise using more natural products to help sunburns heal and to avoid further irritation," explains Shaikh.

How long does sunburn last?

Mild to moderate sunburn can often last for as much as a week, so it's important to continue caring for the area until the skin has completely healed. You may continue to experience soreness, redness or other symptoms such as skin peeling. So how should you best care for sun-damaged skin?

How to stop sunburn peeling

"I suggest the continued application of after sun and moisturising products, which will really work at rehydrating the skin, locking in moisture. Following this step will help prevent peeling and relieve the burning, prickling and itching symptoms. When washing, I would continue to use cool water, as hot water will be uncomfortable and add heat back to the skin, which is what we are avoiding."

"Again, treat the burn from the inside out by replenishing fluids and taking anti-inflammatory relief. In short, continue following the initial steps until the symptoms and burns ease. Try not to scratch or pick at peeling skin. And as tempting as its cooling properties may be, refrain from using ice," advises Shaikh.

It's also best to keep out of the sun as much as possible while your skin heals. "I would strongly advise anyone with any degree of sunburn, not to venture back into the sun until fully healed," says Shaikh. "Should you have to go outside, you should fully cover the affected areas with loose-fitting, breathable clothing, and seek shade as much as possible."

How to prevent sunburn

As well as protecting any damaged skin, it's important to follow advice carefully to avoid sunburn going forward. "It is globally advised to avoid the sun between 11 am and 3 pm, which is when it is at its hottest with an abundance of harmful ultraviolet UV rays," explains Shaikh.

"When outside, seek shade, coverup, stay out of the sun, stay hydrated and, again, always wear SPF. Sadly, the damage incurred from sunburn is permanent and long-lasting so should be avoided at all costs. Your burns will heal but my biggest offering of advice is that prevention is better than cure.

"I advise wearing sun-protective glasses, especially on the face, 365 days of the year. Even in bleak and rainy weather, UV rays are still able to penetrate through inclement weather and penetrate the skin. During the summer, I advise a minimum of SPF30 [sunscreen](#) on the body and face. Pay attention to reapplication - for example if you go into a swimming pool, or have been exposed for several hours."

How to treat severe sunburn

While minor to moderate sunburn can usually be treated effectively at home, more severe sunburn may require additional medical attention. So what signs should you be looking out for?

"You should seek medical advice or call your doctor if your sunburns or symptoms are severe. For example, if your skin is blistering, swollen, or the burns are covering a large part of the body, this would be deemed as severe. Additionally, if you have a temperature, show signs of fever, feel fatigued, sick or dizzy, these suggest medical attention is needed. These symptoms could be indicative of [heat](#) exhaustion or the chances of developing a heat stroke, which is often a result of a bad sunburn and needs attention."

Can sunburn cause heatstroke?

Severe sunburn can lead to heat exhaustion, also known as heatstroke. This is where your body is having to work overtime to keep your internal environment at a constant temperature, prompt action is required but medical attention may not be needed. Heat stroke, where the normal mechanisms to keep your internal temperature normal have failed, is a medical emergency. So it's crucial to know the different signs to look out for in [heat exhaustion and heat stroke](#).

For severe symptoms, contact your GP or emergency care for advice.

And if you're not sure, it's always better to err on the side of caution: "Should you question the integrity of your health or severity of the condition, it is always best to seek advice or support on the premise of being safe, rather than sorry," advises Shiakh. If your symptoms are mild but still causing you concern, try speaking to your pharmacist or ringing NHS 111.

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