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How to treat sunburn blisters

Hot weather seems like the best time to soak up the sun, work on a tan or play outdoors, but warmth and heat can be dangerous. Sunburn can sometimes blister causing pain and infection. What causes sunburn blisters and how do you treat them?

While sunlight provides health benefits such as increasing vitamin D levels, it can also cause problems such as [sunburned skin](#), sunburn blisters, peeling skin and other symptoms such as headache or feeling sick (sun poisoning)¹. Excessive exposure to sunlight can also increase your risk of [heat stroke and](#) over time can cause [skin cancer](#).

Sunburn blisters cause considerable pain and damage to your skin. Without proper treatment, they can become infected, causing more tissue damage and scarring. It is important to spot sunburn blisters early and choose the best treatments to help them heal quickly.

What are sunburn blisters?

Sunburn blisters are skin injuries caused by [second-degree](#) sunburn. They occur when the sun burns and damages tissues in the skin. This then appears as small, fluid-filled, painful, raised bumps. Sunburn blisters develop around six to 24 hours after excessive exposure to sunlight. They can be very itchy.

Why does sunburn blister?

Blisters can occur when the skin has been severely exposed to the sun's heat and UV (ultraviolet) rays. This causes UV damage and this severe burning damages blood vessels and other tissues in the skin, causing their fluid to leak out. When the leaked fluid collects, blisters form, and you have a sunburn blister.

People with lighter skin tones are more likely to have blisters than those with darker skin tones. That's because darker skin has higher levels of melanin, which helps to protect the skin against UV rays.

Do sunburn blisters scar?

Sunburn blisters are unlikely to scar if they are mild, affect a small area, and remain uninfected. However, they can scar if the blisters are severe, extensive, or if they become infected.

How should you treat a sunburn blister?

You can treat sunburn blisters at home or in a clinic. The way you treat them depends on how bad the blistering is and if there are other symptoms of illness:

- Home treatment is suitable when mild to moderate sunburn blisters cover a small area of skin without any other symptoms of ill health.
- You should seek medical attention if severe sunburn blisters affect large areas of skin or are accompanied by other symptoms of illness.

How to treat sunburn blisters at home?

While treating sunburn blisters at home, you should aim to relieve pain, prevent infection, and promote healing.

Here are some steps you can take to accomplish that:

- Take pain relief medication such as paracetamol or ibuprofen.
- Cover the blisters with cold, damp compresses.
- Apply a moisturiser containing [aloe vera](#) to the blisters.
- Drink plenty of water to prevent dehydration.
- Wear sun-protective clothing such as long sleeve shirts and sun hats.

You should avoid:

- Further exposure to sunlight.
- Picking the blisters.

- Applying oil or petroleum jelly – such as Vaseline – to blisters.
- Vigorous scrubbing.
- Scratching blisters.

Should you pop a blister from sunburn?

Dr Paul Banwell, a cosmetic surgeon with the Banwell Clinic in East Grinstead, says: "You really should not pop the blisters because blisters form to help your skin heal and protect you from infection."

Popping a sunburn blister makes it easier for it to become infected. The intact blister covers the damaged skin underneath and provides a space for it to heal. Popping a blister disrupts that space and exposes the damaged skin to germs.

What to put on a popped sunburn blister?

Sometimes sunburn blisters pop on their own. In such cases, you should gently clean the area, cover them with an antibiotic ointment, and wrap them in a non-stick gauze bandage. The key is to keep them dry.

How to prevent sunburn from blistering?

Once the skin has suffered from [sunburn](#) blisters, there is no way to reverse it. So, the best way to prevent blistering is to not get sunburnt in the first place.

Sunburn can be prevented by:

- Staying indoors between 11am and 4pm when the sun is at its peak.
- Applying a liberal amount of sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 30 or more whenever you are outdoors.
- Reapplying sunscreen after swimming, baths, or excessive sweating.
- Wearing protective clothing such as long-sleeved loose tops, sunglasses, and wide-brimmed hats.
- Taking extra precautions while taking medications that increase sun sensitivity.

How long do blisters from sunburn last?

Mild to moderate blisters can heal in about a week. After the healing process, they may leave coloured dark or light spots on your skin for up to a year.

Severe sunburn blisters can take longer than a week to heal. If your sunburn blisters don't heal in seven days, seek medical advice.

Further reading

1. N. Mead, [Benefits of Sunlight: A Bright Spot for Human Health](#)

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Originally Published: 20/11/2023		Document ID: doc_32033

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