

How To Treat And Heal A Sunburn

Get rid of sunburn as quickly as possible with these skin-soothing tips from experts.

by Jessica Rendall

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One of the biggest bummers about summer is a sunburn, in my (pale) opinion. Besides the pain and tenderness a burn brings on, sunburns are annoying and can get in the way of whatever outdoor fun you were trying to have. They can also lead to more damage down the line, such as premature skin aging and cancer.

Sunburn is caused by too much exposure to ultraviolet (UV) light, through natural sunlight or artificial sources (looking at you, tanning beds). And it usually appears within a few hours.

Sunburns can take days to heal, but some simple home remedies may offer you some quicker relief if you've overstayed the sun's welcome. We checked in with some experts to learn the best way to treat a sunburn.

SUNBURN AND TREATMENT 101

A first-degree sunburn is the most common type, and it usually has mild symptoms such as skin redness or tenderness, according to Dr. Lucy Chen, a board-certified dermatologist at Riverchase Dermatology. A second-degree sunburn will turn the skin a deeper red and possibly lead to swelling and blistering, Chen told CNET. "This type of sunburn can be highly uncomfortable," she said.

Dr. Rebecca Baxt, a board-certified dermatologist with the American Academy of Dermatology, offers a few suggestions for home treatment of a first-degree sunburn that's causing discomfort: "Cold compresses, aloe vera gel and over-the-counter hydrocortisone cream or ointment."

Chen said an "unusual yet effective" natural remedy for sunburn is to blend oatmeal, milk and honey and apply it to the burnt area.

"With a second-degree burn, there is a chance you would want to seek medical attention," Chen wrote. "Like a first-degree sunburn, soak the sunburnt area in cold water, but for about 15 minutes rather than only a few. If the skin is blistered, it would be wise to apply an antibacterial cream to prevent an infection."

According to the AAD, if your sunburn is severe enough to give you blisters, you should let them heal untouched. If the blisters cover a large area, or if you have chills, a headache or fever, you should seek immediate medical care, the Academy says. It also notes you should avoid using products that end in "-caine," such as benzocaine.

Additional treatments for sunburn include drinking lots of water (rehydrating as the sunburn draws fluid to the skin's surface), moisturizing and taking aspirin or ibuprofen if needed for swelling and discomfort, per the AAD.

For people with darker skin tones, there's less of a risk for sunburn because of the protective melanin their skin has.

"Sunburns in light skin are red," Baxt says. "Red shows inflammation, and your skin is recruiting cells to try to repair the damage." Although it's more "unusual" for a person with darker skin to get a sunburn, Baxt says, it happens; it just may be harder to see. If you have darker skin and other symptoms of sunburn like skin tenderness or peeling, you should use the same sunburn home remedies.

Baxt says prevention is key when it comes to sunburn. "The way you prevent it is by using sunscreen appropriately and seeking shade, and wearing protective clothing," Baxt says. "It's all in the prevention. Once you get the burn it just has to heal."

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