

## Patient education: Sunburn (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

**What is a sunburn?** — A sunburn happens when the skin gets burned from invisible light called ultraviolet (UV) light. UV light comes from the sun and can cause a sunburn when a person is in the sun for too long. People can also get a sunburn on a cloudy day, because UV light can go through clouds.

Another way people can get a sunburn is from a tanning bed. Tanning beds use UV light to give people a tan.

**Why should I avoid getting a sunburn?** — It's important to avoid getting a sunburn, because people who get a lot of sunburns have a higher chance of getting certain other problems. These include:

- Skin cancer – There are different types of skin cancer. Most skin cancers can be treated easily. But sunburn increases the risk of getting a serious type of skin cancer, called "melanoma."
- Wrinkles and other skin changes that usually happen when people get older
- Eye problems called "cataracts" that can cause trouble seeing

**What can increase my chance of getting a sunburn?** — Your chance of getting a burn from the sun increases if you:

- Have pale skin and light-colored hair
- Are on a mountain or in a place that is closer to the sun
- Take certain medicines that can cause the skin to burn more easily

**What are the symptoms of a sunburn?** — Symptoms of a sunburn happen 3 to 5 hours after being in the sun and include:

- Redness ([picture 1](#)) – The redness is worst 12 to 24 hours after being in the sun and usually fades over 3 days.
- Pain
- Skin that feels hot when touched

In some cases, sunburns can be severe. Severe sunburns can cause:

- Blisters ([picture 2](#))
- Severe pain
- Swelling
- Fever

**Can I treat a sunburn on my own?** — You can treat a mild sunburn on your own by:

- Taking a pain-relieving medicine
- Applying cool compresses or soaks

- Using a lotion or spray made for treating sunburns – These products usually have aloe or a numbing medicine in them.
- Staying out of the sun until the redness and pain go away

**Should I see a doctor or nurse?** — You should call your doctor or nurse if you have a severe sunburn. Depending on your symptoms, he or she will tell you if you can treat your sunburn at home or if you need to see a doctor.

**Can sunburns be prevented?** — Yes. You can prevent sunburns by:

- Staying out of the sun in the middle of the day (from 10AM to 4PM), when the sun's light is strongest
- Staying under a sun umbrella, tree, or other shady spot
- Wearing sunscreen – Put sunscreen on all parts of the body that are not covered by clothes. Then reapply sunscreen every 2 to 3 hours, or after you sweat or swim. It's important to choose a sunscreen that:
  - Has an SPF of 30 or greater – SPF is a number that tells you how well a sunscreen protects the skin from UV light.
  - Protects against 2 types of UV light, called "UVA" and "UVB." (Sunscreens that offer both UVA and UVB protection are sometimes called "broad spectrum.")
  - Has not expired or is not more than 3 years old
- Wearing lip balm that has an SPF of 30 or greater
- Wearing sunglasses, a wide-brimmed hat, long-sleeved shirt, or long pants
- Not using tanning beds

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[Patient education: Melanoma skin cancer \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Skin burns \(The Basics\)](#)

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## GRAPHICS

### Sunburn

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This person has a sunburn on the back. The skin that was not covered by clothes has turned red.

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## Sunburn

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This child has a severe sunburn. The skin is red and swollen, and blisters have formed.

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