

# Skin Care for Summer and All Year Long

By Conal Darcy

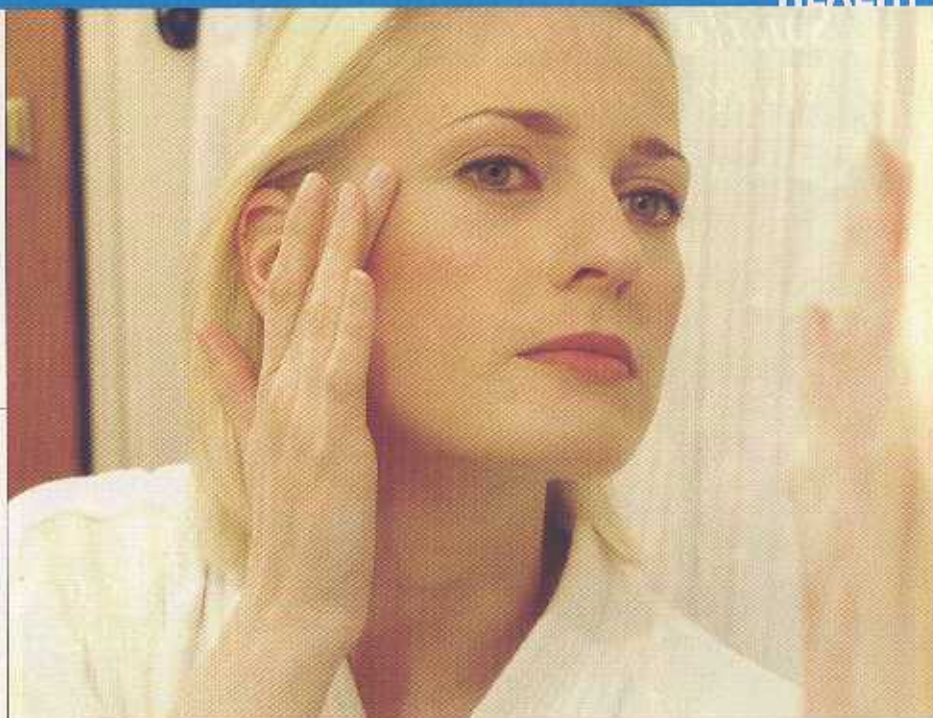
I remember hearing once you can always tell an Australian by his skin. This is true for those Aussies who do not follow basic sun-care advice, like my grandmother, who successfully battled skin cancer years ago. She grew up in a time when sunburns were considered unavoidable annoyances in life and mostly harmless. We now know that a hole in the ozone has been slowly developing above southern Australia, leaving its residents at extreme risk.

Though there is no hole in the ozone above the United States yet, we are also at risk. Even with the earth's protective layer, the sun's rays can cause serious damage, aging skin and increasing the risk of cancer. So before you languish beside a pool or spend a day at the beach, learn about protecting yourself.

## What Is a Sunburn?

When you stay in the sun too long, ultraviolet (UV) rays damage skin cells. Your body reacts by flooding the area with blood to help repair them, making the burned area red. As with other burns, nerve cells become irritated and painful, warning you of the damage.

If a burn is bad enough, the skin may begin to peel about a day after the initial exposure. This is a first-degree burn, meaning the top layer of skin has been so damaged that the body needs to get rid of it. According to the National Institutes of Health, even one such severe sunburn doubles your chances of developing



*malignant melanoma*, a dangerous skin cancer, and can also bring about *basal cell* and *squamous cell* cancers.

## Prevention

When dealing with the sun, the old adage remains true: an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency suggests the following tips to prevent sun damage:

First, decrease exposure to the sun. Seek shade outside and wear tightly woven clothing and effective sunglasses. A long-sleeved shirt and a broad-brimmed hat go a long way in saving your skin.

Second, avoid the most dangerous time of day. The sun's rays are strongest between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., when burns can develop in as little as 15 minutes.

Third, use sunscreen effectively. Apply it a half hour before you set foot in the sun so that your skin has time to absorb it. Reapply it after you swim or spend a few hours in the sun, because sunscreen washes away with water or sweat. The type and strength of sunscreen you use is very important. See the box for help deciding which type is right for you.

## Damage Control

So, you spent a day on the boat and forgot the sunscreen. Now you return home to find you're redder than a boiled lobster. What do you do?

If you're in any kind of discomfort, try applying a cool, wet compress to the burn for 10 to 15 minutes or take a cool bath with some added baking soda. Afterward, apply a moisturizing lotion, especially one with aloe, to lessen pain and prevent inflammation. Avoid applying petroleum jelly, benzocaine, lidocaine, and butter. They can worsen symptoms and prevent healing, according to the National Institutes of Health.

If the pain is especially bad, try over-the-counter pain medication. Do not give aspirin to children who have fevers, however, as this may lead to Reyes syndrome, a potentially deadly condition.

To reduce damage, experts suggest, apply vitamin E oil to the burn. The sun's rays produce free radicals, molecules linked with cancer and the inflammation and irritation associated with sunburns. Vitamin E is effective in cleaning up these free radicals and reducing their effect.

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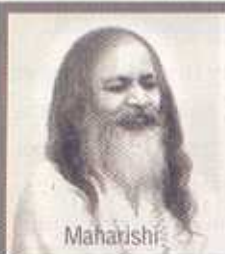
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While it's best to apply vitamin E directly after sun exposure, its beneficial properties remain when it is applied up to 8 hours later.

Vitamin C is also a good remedy for mopping up those free radicals and strengthening skin. Increasing consumption of citrus fruits and vitamin C supplements for the first few days after a burn can speed up the healing process from the inside out. Since vitamin C isn't stored in the body, you'll need to continually replenish it.

### Tanning

When we tan, our bodies produce more melanin, the skin's protective pigment. In light-skinned people, melanin production increases dramatically with exposure to the sun, but it may take hours to do so. This is why it usually takes a few days and sessions in the sun to get a bronze body. Though it takes longer to burn with an initial tan, experts agree that there is no "safe tan." Tanned skin is a reaction to sun damage and can still burn if not protected.

Tanning booths and salons are not necessarily safe alternatives to sitting outside. The lamps used in these facilities produce two to three times as much radiation as the sun and can cause just as much damage. Twenty minutes in a booth can equal up to a day's worth of sunbathing.

### Cosmetic Effects

Though that tan may look good now, you'll end up paying for it in the future. Repeated overexposure to the sun has a host of harmful effects. The main problem is premature skin aging. Just as it implies, skin that has been frequently damaged will appear older than it really is.

Most noticeable is the drying of skin and a loss of elasticity. Repeated sun damage thins the skin, but does not reduce the number of skin cells present, creating



sagging and wrinkles. Skin also appears more translucent, making blood vessels beneath more apparent.

Freckles are a visible response to too much sun. Though they may be cute, they indicate problems. When damaged, the cells that produce skin pigment enlarge and become darker. Dark-skinned people can get freckles, but they are more noticeable in light-skinned people. In time, freckles can grow so large they become liver spots. Additionally, moles and precancerous lesions that look like warts and crusty bumps are likely to appear on sun-damaged skin after long-term exposure.

### Beneficial Effects

The sun does have good effects, however. When exposed to sunshine, our bodies produce vitamin D, a cancer-fighting agent. A lack of vitamin D can result in

rickets, especially in children. Sunscreen does prevent vitamin D from being produced, but this does not mean you should forgo it next time. Some foods and supplements are fortified with this vitamin, and about 15 minutes a day of exposure to the sun is all you need to produce enough vitamin D for a healthy adult. Any more and you risk causing more harm than good.

### Other Factors

Chances of burns vary greatly from person to person and from place to place. The intensity of the sun's rays increases with the altitude. Lower latitudes near the equator mean more direct exposure. Open water and snow can reflect UV rays, increasing exposure drastically. Burns can even develop on cloudy days; just because clouds block the sunshine does not mean they block higher-energy UV rays too.



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Too much time in the sun for anybody can cause painful burns and greatly increase the chances of skin cancer. The young are particularly at risk, especially infants, and great pains should be taken to protect them with clothing and sun-

shades. But if you want to keep that baby-smooth skin yourself, don't forget the sunscreen next time. ■

*Editorial Assistant Conal Darcy burns easily and always wears his sunscreen.*

## Which Sunscreen Is Best for Me?

Sunscreen is a protective lotion designed to absorb or reflect ultraviolet (UV) rays before they hit your skin. Most sunscreens only protect against UVB rays, which cause immediate damage, such as burns. UVA rays can cause long-term problems, but aren't typically blocked. When searching for a sunscreen, look for *broad spectrum protection* or explicit mention of both A and B rays to ensure full coverage.

The first discovered and most effective form is the zinc oxide cream made famous by lifeguards' noses. Zinc oxide is opaque and very effective at dispersing UV rays, though not very chic. For invisible protection, you sacrifice some coverage for looks. Though not as effective as the opaque sunscreens, clear sunscreen is better than none.

### SPF

According to U.S. Food and Drug Administration guidelines, the sun protection factor (SPF) of a sunscreen is a consistent value indicating how much it blocks

UVB rays. SPF 15, the minimum recommended by the American Cancer Society, blocks approximately 93 percent of UVB rays. Because of the way SPF is calculated, the increase in the amount of UV protection decreases as the SPF goes up. Therefore, the difference between 10 and 20 SPF is much greater than the difference between 30 and 60 SPF.

A good rule of thumb is to use the SPF as a multiplier. If you normally burn after 15 minutes, SPF 10 could allow you to spend 150 minutes in the sun. But be careful! Various factors can greatly influence this time, including your skin type, how you apply the sunscreen, and the environment surrounding you. And remember that no SPF blocks 100 percent of UV rays.

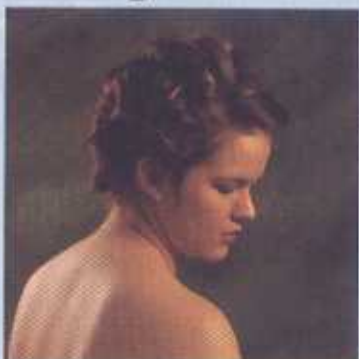
#### Sources:

American Cancer Society ([www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org))  
National Institutes of Health ([www.nih.gov](http://www.nih.gov))  
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Environmental Protection Agency Sunwise Program ([www.epa.gov/sunwise](http://www.epa.gov/sunwise))

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