

what is a sunburn?

Here's what a sunburn really means — and what to do next.



story highlights

- A sunburn is skin's defensive response to severe UV damage
 - The best treatments are hydration and protection
 - A single sunburn may result in skin cancer years later
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We've all done it: paired too much time in the sun with too little sunscreen, ending the day with a red, sore sunburn. (Oops.) You're probably well aware that a sunburn equals skin damage, but let's take a closer look at what that means — and what you should do next.

What exactly is a sunburn?

A sunburn is the skin's response to ultraviolet (UV) exposure — and an indicator of severe damage. Just 10 minutes of intense UV exposure can set skin's defense system in motion, ultimately causing any of the following signs:

- Redness — the body's inflammatory response, resulting from dilation of blood vessels
- Tightness — as the skin loses moisture and hydration
- Tanning — as skin produces more melanin in an attempt to stop UV rays from penetrating through to deeper layers of the skin
- Hypo- or hyperpigmentation — irregular light or dark patches resulting from extreme UV exposure

Why is my skin peeling?

Peeling after a sunburn is one of skin's self-defense mechanisms: it's your body's way of getting rid of the damaged cells that are at risk of "losing control" and becoming cancerous. This mass death of cells results in whole layers of damaged skin peeling off, to be replaced by other cells underneath those layers.

I have a sunburn. What do I do now?

First of all, get out of the sun — and don't risk further sun exposure until your skin has healed. Next steps:

- Drink plenty of water — dehydration often comes along with sunburn!
- If skin is severely blistered, seek help from a medical practitioner
- Take a cool bath (no products added) and then pat skin dry.
- Apply products with soothing ingredients like Aloe, Lavender or Cucumber. Avoid thick creams, which can block the skin's natural cooling process.
- To rehydrate skin, look for products that contain ingredients like Algae or Hyaluronic Acid.

Most importantly, give sunburned skin time to heal! For the next couple weeks, stay out of the sun whenever possible and cover sunburned areas with clothing or sunscreen if you must risk exposure. Plus, remember that skin is a great record keeper. Even if you can't see the damage, UV exposure can cause skin cancer years down the road — so prevention truly is the best medicine!