

A New Report Says Some SPF Numbers Don't Add Up—So What To Do?



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Most of us know to apply sunscreen when we're headed outside, but a new report suggests that we may not be getting the protection we're expecting. Consumer Reports tested 34 sunscreens and found that almost a third of them didn't meet the SPF claim on their labels. Some formulas also didn't protect skin against UVA rays, the ever-present rays that cause signs of aging.

So, does this mean your sunscreen can't be trusted? Not necessarily. "I think the study probably has some merit," says Gary Goldenberg, MD, a dermatologist at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York. "There's been criticism [of the report] because it's not the way the Food and Drug Administration measures sunscreens, but I think *that* way isn't actually how consumers use them." In other words, that doesn't mean sunscreen companies are lying about SPF protection, he says; it just means people are using them differently.

In a perfect world, people would generously apply sunscreen 30 minutes before heading outside. In reality, many people apply it immediately before sun exposure (or even when we're already at the beach). After a dip in the pool—during which unabsorbed sunscreen washes off into the water—we often towel off, which rubs some of the sunscreen off in the process. It all adds up to less-than-ideal protection.

The best way to be fully protected, Dr. Goldenberg says, involves a multi-tiered approach. First, apply a broad-spectrum sunscreen 30 minutes before going outside. Secondly, avoid the sun in general, especially during the hours between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. "Seek the shade, stay under an umbrella, wear a hat—and if you're going to be outside at noon, I recommend sun-protective clothing," he says. (Look for clothing with a UPF rating.)

Dr. Goldenberg generally recommends using a cream or lotion formula instead of a spray, and aim for an SPF rating of 50. (He personally uses La Roche-Posay Anthelios, which also topped the list of Consumer Reports' best-rated sunscreens.) And, as always, the most effective SPF is the one you actually *use*. "As far as sunscreen goes, I always tell patients, you cannot reapply too often," Dr. Goldenberg says. Want to learn even more? Head over to Consumer Reports for the full, uh, consumer report.