

5 Ways to Care for Your Skin Before and After a Swim

BY JANE CHERTOFF • MAY 1, 2018



Spending a lazy summer day at a beautiful pool may be the best way to enjoy the season. And with warm weather just around the corner, you've probably got your beach bag ready with a new swimsuit, towel and clarifying shampoo. Before you dive in, though, you might want to spend some time prepping your skin, too.

While chlorine's harsh effects on the scalp (and that nasty knack for turning your hair green) get all the attention, it turns out that pool chemicals may be equally unkind to your skin if you're not careful. (If you've ever felt itchy after swimming in a pool, you've already experienced this "scaly mermaid" skin.)

Here's how dermatologists recommend caring for your skin before and after a swim.

1. Prep your skin with a barrier cream

“Chlorine is added to swimming pools to disinfect and prevent the rise and spread of bacterial, viral and protozoan diseases,” explains Dr. Estee Williams, a board-certified dermatologist in New York City. “Due to its caustic nature, chlorine is a cause of irritant contact dermatitis, namely red, dry, itchy skin.”

To avoid that uncomfortable itch and redness, Williams recommends prepping your skin with a barrier cream before getting in the pool. Look for products with glycerin, oils or petrolatum listed on the ingredients. Bonus if it contains dimethicone, which forms a seal between the chlorine and your delicate skin.

Note: Not all pools allow moisturizers to be worn by swimmers, as they may interfere with the disinfecting chemicals. Check the rules before lathering up.

2. Shower and moisturize immediately post-swim

You already know you usually need to rinse off before entering the pool, per the listed rules. But if you wait until you get home to shower after a swim, you're doing your skin a disservice. “Rinse off right after!” cautions **Dr. Kristina Goldenberg**, board-certified dermatologist in New York City. “Do not let the chlorinated water sit on the skin for a long period of time,” she warns. Warm-to-cool, clean water is best to avoid additional dryness.

In the locker room, you may also use a mild and hydrating cleanser or body wash to start to restore the skin's pH balance from the pool chemicals, per the American Academy of Dermatology. After rinsing off, reapply a moisturizer to restore hydration to the skin, Goldenberg recommends.

3. Don't air dry!

After a cool dip, you may be tempted to just lie on your towel and let the sun dry you off. That's not the best idea, Goldenberg cautions. “There is a misconception that air-drying is beneficial for the skin, but that's simply not the case. Air-drying will lead to more dryness of the skin,” she says. She recommends rinsing off with clean water (see above) and then drying yourself with a cotton towel instead. After that, it's time to get back to sunning—after applying more SPF, of course.

4. Keep the moisturizer coming

If your skin is still feeling dry/flaky after you get home from the pool, switch to a thicker moisturizer or ointment. “Remember, lotions are not as hydrating as creams, and creams are not as hydrating as ointments,” Goldenberg says. “What works for one person may not work for you.”

Williams echoes the suggestion for an ointment after a long day in the sun and pool. “Apply a thick emollient (ointment) to the skin from the neck down before going to bed,” she suggests.

5. Don't forget your face

Luckily, swimming doesn't usually lead to breakouts on your face. However, it may be as dry and irritating for the face as for the rest of your body, notes Goldenberg. “Hydration before and after swimming is key,” she says. “And remember to rinse your face right after the pool, too!”