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Here's How to Actually Treat a Painful Sunburn

Since cursing at the sun doesn't count.



Even if you do your best to protect your skin from the sun, sometimes shit happens. Maybe you were in a rush to get to the beach and didn't slather sunscreen everywhere you should have, or perhaps you forgot to reapply the

stuff on schedule. Point is, sometimes you pay for your sun-safety misdeeds with a terribly painful sunburn. That's why we consulted dermatologists for the best steps you can take to treat your sunburn symptoms.

That burnt-to-a-crisp feeling happens when your skin is exposed to too much ultraviolet (UV) light from the sun.

UV light is a wavelength of sunlight, the Mayo Clinic explains. There's Ultraviolet A (UVA) radiation, which is the kind that causes skin aging, and Ultraviolet B (UVB) radiation, which leads to sunburns. Both can result in skin cancer. There's also Ultraviolet C (UVC) radiation, although the ozone layer blocks most of these rays from reaching Earth, according to the National Cancer Institute.

When your skin is exposed to UV light, your body tries to protect itself by making melanin, the dark pigment in the outer layer of your skin, according to the Mayo Clinic, which causes your skin to darken a bit. But that can only help so much, even in people with dark skin, which signals that they have a lot of protective melanin. If you're roasting in a ton of UV light, you can pass right by the tanning threshold, winding up with the redness, stinging or itching sensation, and swelling that characterize sunburns. Your skin may also actually *feel* hot and bubble up into small blisters. If your sunburn is really intense, you might deal with a headache, fever, nausea, and fatigue as well, according to the Mayo Clinic.

These symptoms usually show up a few hours after your sun overexposure, but it could take a day or longer to know just how bad your burn is, the Mayo Clinic says. A few days after the burn, the top layer of your skin may peel off (this is your body's attempt to heal itself), and the layer below that may have an unusual color and pattern for a bit.

Every sunburn is different, but bad ones can take several days or longer to heal, the Mayo Clinic says.

There's nothing you can do to magically make your sunburn disappear, but there are a few tactics you can try to ease your suffering.

Once you realize you've been burned, it's important to get out of the sun and treat the burn as soon as you can, the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD) says. Try a few (or all) of these tips to help:

1. Take cool baths or showers.

Hot water can irritate your (already aggravated) skin, but relaxing under a cool stream can help soothe inflammation, **Gary Goldenberg, M.D.**, assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital, tells SELF. If you can submerge yourself in a cool bath, even better.

As soon as you get out of the tub or shower, gently pat yourself dry. Leave a little moisture on your skin, then apply a moisturizer, the AAD advises. This helps trap the water on your skin and can reduce dryness that would exacerbate your irritation.

If you don't have time to hang in the shower or bath, try placing a cool, damp towel on your skin for relief, Dr. Goldenberg says, and then follow it up with moisturizer.

2. Use a moisturizer with aloe vera, soy, or calamine. If that's not enough, try a hydrocortisone cream.

People champion aloe vera for its skin-soothing properties, and it can indeed help with irritation during a sunburn, the AAD says. Soy might be a more surprising ingredient for sunburn aftercare, but it could allow your skin to trap more moisturizing water. You might also want to apply calamine lotion to help with the itching and discomfort. And, if you're really having a rough go of it, you can use an OTC hydrocortisone cream to address issues like swelling, itching, and redness.

Heads up: You'll want to avoid products with petroleum, as moisturizing as they may seem, because they can trap heat in your skin, the AAD says.

3. Take a pain reliever.

Your body sees a sunburn as an injury, so it responds with inflammation, Misha Rosenbach, M.D., associate professor of dermatology in the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, tells SELF. Cue the pain. Taking an over-the-counter pain reliever, especially a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug like aspirin or ibuprofen, can help calm down your dermatological fire, Dr. Goldenberg says.

4. Drink a lot of water.

A sunburn brings fluid to the surface of your skin and away from your insides, the AAD explains. Drinking more water than usual when you're sunburned can help keep you from getting dehydrated.

Everyone's fluid needs are different, but most women should drink around 11.5 cups of liquids a day, according to the Mayo Clinic. (This includes fluids from drinks like coffee and the foods you eat.) Aim to have a few extra cups of liquid per day if you're sunburned, Dr. Goldenberg says, but don't push it to the point where you're uncomfortable. Alternately, don't stop there if you still feel parched. Listen to your body.

5. If you have blisters, don't even think about popping them.

Blisters, which are your skin's way of trying to heal and stave off infection, mean you have a second-degree burn that has gone past the outer layer of your skin, the AAD says. Though it's super tempting to pop them, don't. You might just be signing up for an infection, or at the very least, a world of pain.

If a blister breaks on its own, the Mayo Clinic recommends cleaning it with mild soap and water, dabbing on some antibiotic cream, then applying a non-stick gauze bandage.

6. Wear sunscreen and clothes that protect your skin from the sun.

"Stacking one sunburn on top of another is not a great idea," Dr. Rosenbach says. So, yes, sunscreen is a must when you venture outside as your sunburn heals. So is wearing a wardrobe that covers up your skin, according to the AAD. The organization specifically suggests opting for tightly-woven fabrics, pointing out that you shouldn't see any brightness poking through an item of clothing when you hold it up to the light.

7. Avoid using pain relief products with ingredients ending in "-caine."

There are plenty of pain-relieving creams and sprays out there with ingredients ending in "-caine," like lidocaine and benzocaine. Take a pass on using them for your sunburn. They can irritate your tender skin or even cause an allergic reaction, the Mayo Clinic says.

If your skin is blistering a lot or is extremely red and painful, or if you try these treatment options and are still in severe discomfort, call your dermatologist.

You may need a prescription for an oral corticosteroid like prednisone to help with the inflammation or antibiotics if you've developed an infection, Dr. Goldenberg says. Hopefully that will help you put this sunburn behind you.

P.S.: We know you didn't come here for a lecture or anything, but we're just going to leave some sun safety tips right here if you need them. When it comes to sunburns, as Dr. Rosenbach says, the best defense is a good offense: "Try not to get sunburned in the first place."