

# Itchy Sunburn? Here's How To Relieve Hell's Itch, According To Experts

Alexa, order aloe.



BY **KORIN MILLER** MAR 3, 2020



Nothing screams, “I totally forgot to use sunscreen!!!” like a flaming red sunburn but, you know, it happens to the best of us. That said, having an itchy sunburn is just cruel. Like, you’re already suffering enough—what’s with the itch?

Turns out, you’re not the only one who’s gone through this before. Super itchy sunburns actually have a name—Hell’s itch—which would be kinda funny if you weren’t currently living through it.

But seriously, what’s the deal here? And why you, anyway? Dermatologists have some thoughts about—and fixes for!—itchy, painful, annoying AF burns.

## Is it normal for a sunburn to get itchy?

Surprisingly, yes. “Sunburns usually produce the sensation of itch and/or pain. These sensations use same nerve fibers to transmit signals to the brain and often are felt together,” explains **Gary Goldenberg, MD**, assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York City.

That said, this sh\*t can get intense. “Sometimes, especially when the sunburn is deep, the sensation of pain and itch can be very strong and medical treatment is necessary,” Goldenberg says. Itching and scratching your poor, inflamed skin (because, how can you not?) can even cause an infection thanks to bacteria that can be hanging out under your fingernails.

What causes hell’s itch exactly? It’s the same mechanism as a “normal” sunburn itch, just cranked way up. Inflammation from an extreme sunburn “affects the nerves, resulting in a significant itch,” says Joshua Zeichner, MD, a New York City–based dermatologist.

Just a heads up: In some cases, your skin might itch because of a sun-related rash called polymorphous light eruption (PMLE). “It is essentially a sun sensitivity or allergy that leads to red, itchy rashes in some exposed areas,” says Dr. Zeichner. That’s not ~technically~ a sunburn, but it’s easy to see how you can confuse the two.

Ultimately, it’s best to call your doctor if you’re uncomfortable. Or, you know, in total agony.

## Okay, how the eff do I relieve the itching?

Luckily, you don’t have to just try to rise above it. There are plenty of at-home remedies you can use if you’re somewhere between itchy AF and ready to call your doctor.

- **Aloe vera:** This gelatinous substance from the aloe plant soothes and hydrates skin, Dr. Zeichner says.
- **A heavy moisturizer:** “Similar to aloe, moisturizers hydrate the skin and form a protective seal over the outer skin layer,” Dr. Zeichner says.
- **Hydrocortisone cream:** This is all about decreasing inflammation in your skin, Dr. Goldenberg says. “It’s like a fire extinguisher for the skin,” Dr. Zeichner adds.
- **Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs):** NSAIDs like ibuprofen and aspirin “help decrease pain and inflammation,” Dr. Goldenberg says.
- **An oral antihistamine:** “They really work by calming any allergic reaction in the skin and providing a sedating effect,” Dr. Zeichner says.
- **Cool compresses:** Laying a cool, wet washcloth on your skin can help constrict blood vessels and reduce inflammation, Dr. Zeichner says.
- **Drinking lots of water:** “Sunburns damage the skin barrier function, which means extra water is needed to rehydrate the body,” Dr. Goldenberg says.
- **Taking a bath with colloidal oatmeal:** Colloidal oatmeal helps to protect your skin, soothe the burn, and reduce inflammation.

- **Cover your skin:** You'll want to do your best to help protect the burned area from environmental factors that can damage it further, like wind and more sun, Dr. Goldenberg notes.
- **Moisturize often:** You don't just want to slap some cream on the burn and call it a day; reapply throughout the day to help repair the skin barrier.

## Anything I **\*shouldn't\*** do to an itchy sunburn?

The last thing you want to do is make things worse. So, keep these tips in mind:

- **Don't scratch:** It can be hard AF, but scratching can open you up to all kinds of future pain. Also, "the skin barrier is already disrupted," Dr. Zeichner points out. Scratching will make things way worse.
- **Don't pick your skin:** It's the same idea as scratching, Dr. Zeichner says. Picking at or removing any areas of your skin will just disrupt your skin barrier even further—and possibly open you up to an infection.
- **Don't forget to cover your skin:** Getting a burn on top of an already painful burn is sheer agony. So make sure your burned skin is covered with both sunscreen and protective clothing before you venture out.