

# SHAPE

## The FDA Is Proposing New Guidelines for Sunscreen That Could Change What You See On Shelves

You're beloved SPF 70 may be no more, but there's a logical reason for that.

By **Korin Miller** | September 29, 2021



Have you ever picked up a bottle of SPF 100 sunscreen and thought, "So this is twice as protective as SPF 50, right?" Well, actually no. And that's one of the big points the Food and Drug Administration is trying to make with the organization's proposed changes to the sunscreen market guidelines. That, plus a handful of other edits that could make choosing the best — and most environmentally safe — sunscreen product a little simpler.

The FDA, which continuously evaluates the safety and efficacy of foods, drugs, and cosmetics — including sunscreen — recently shared suggested edits to rules related to existing guidelines that have the potential to alter how you may shop for sunscreen for your next beach trip or vacation. To state the obvious, right now these are merely suggestions, and any manufacturing or labeling requirements wouldn't be handed down unless (or until) a

final ruling is agreed upon. Even then, companies would have at least a year to comply with the changes. TL;dr this isn't happening tomorrow but you should still care.

Among the most noteworthy recommendations concerns the aforementioned concept of (and frankly, confusion around) super-high SPF labeling. The FDA proposes that the maximum labeled SPF should be SPF 60+. And while that may sound confusing, given that some sunscreens are currently labeled as high as SPF 100, Ife J. Rodney, M.D., founding director of Eternal Dermatology Aesthetics in Maryland, says that higher labels are sometimes misleading. "Beyond an SPF of 60, an increase in the SPF number only gives a small increase in protection from the sun's harmful rays," explains Dr. Rodney. "SPF 100 is *not* twice as effective as SPF 50, and it does not mean that you can stay out in the sun for twice as long." Higher SPF numbers can "lead to a false sense of security," she adds. (See: Does Natural Sunscreen Hold Up Against Regular Sunscreen?)

The organization's recommendations, which reflect proposed rules released in 2019, is that only certain ingredients should be labeled "generally recommended as safe and effective" or GRASE. FTR, the ingredients the FDA has deemed GRASE are zinc oxide and titanium dioxide, which are the two main sun-blocking ingredients in mineral sunscreens. More so, ingredients such as PABA (or Para-aminobenzoic acid) and trolamine salicylate are not considered GRASE due to safety concerns.

But it's not just what's *in* sunscreen that the FDA says should be analyzed, but also what *type* of sunscreen you're buying. The new proposal (as did the 2019 recommendations) suggests that oils, lotions, creams, gels, butters, pastes, ointments, and sticks are all considered safe and effective, but the org says that more testing is needed to confirm whether the same can be said for spray sunscreens specifically.

The FDA is also recommending that sunscreens with SPF values of 15 and above must satisfy broad-spectrum requirements (e.g. making sure consumers can access sunscreen with adequate UVA protection). Requiring that sunscreens have a UVA I / UV ratio of 0.7 or higher "ensures that there is also adequate UVA protection, along with UVB," says Dr. Rodney. (If you need a quick refresher, UVA rays penetrate the skin more deeply than UVB rays. Both, however, can cause skin cancer.) "As the sun's harmful rays contain both UVA and UVB light, it's necessary that all sunscreens protect against both of these," she says.

This all might seem like a lot of manufacturing jargon that doesn't really affect your weekend trips to the lake, but experts are praising the FDA's recommendations for important reasons. "This is a step in the right direction to ensure available sunscreens are meeting standards that make them safe and effective options for sun protection," says Marisa Garshick, M.D., a board-certified dermatologist at MDCS Dermatology in New York. "We know the importance of protecting the skin from the sun and this highlights the FDA's awareness of the importance of sun protection, ensuring that available sunscreens are both safe and effective while also improving transparency for the consumer." (Related: SPF and Sun Protection Myths to Stop Believing, Stat)

The hope is that with these new potential guidelines in place, shoppers will have confidence in their sunscreen products because they are more informed on exactly what they are buying and, perhaps more importantly, why it works. "New rules will further help our patients understand that sunscreens are safe and effective and that the FDA takes sunscreen safety seriously and uses best scientific data to makes its recommendations," says Gary Goldenberg, M.D., a cosmetic and medical dermatologist at Goldenberg Dermatology in New York City.

Overall, experts hope any new additional guidance will help increase sunscreen use in the general population — which means better, healthier skin for all.