

Does Salt Water Boost Your Tan? Doctors Explain.

It's summer 2025, and there's something very weird going on with tanning. It's...hot again. Despite the the fact that the habit can seriously damage [your skin](#), young people are obsessed with soaking up the sun (Gen Z is even [tracking the UV index](#) to find the 'best' times to tan).

It's given rise to all manner of tanning hacks, including one that involves spraying yourself with salt water and roasting in the sun. "It literally works wonders," [one TikTokker says](#). "Literally my holy grail. Now I'm not wasting money on tanning oils!" someone posted in the comments. *What is going on?*

To be fair, this isn't entirely new: Videos like these have been bubbling up for years. But they seem to be getting new life lately as people look to soak up the last few weeks of summer. And it comes on the heels of a [survey](#) released by the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD) that found 67 percent of Americans say they got a tan or darker skin in 2024, up from 25 percent since 2020. Clearly, plenty of people are out there prioritizing a golden glow—and dermatologists have lots of opinions about it.

Meet the experts: [Gary Goldenberg](#), MD, assistant clinical professor of dermatology at Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital; [Ife J. Rodney](#), MD, founding director of Eternal Dermatology + Aesthetics

If you're looking to achieve that sun-kissed look, it's understandable to at least be curious about this hack. But does salt water really boost your tan? And is this even safe to try? Here's what our experts want you to keep in mind.

Does salt water help you tan better?

No, salt water does not help to enhance the tanning effects of the sun. There's no scientific data to support this, and dermatologists say it doesn't even make sense in theory. "It is a myth," says [Gary Goldenberg](#), MD, assistant clinical professor of dermatology at Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital. "Salt water does not help you tan better." Your skin gets tan after it's exposed to UV rays from the sun, which stimulates melanocytes (skin's pigment-producing cells) to produce the melanin that makes your skin darker. "Salt water doesn't enhance this process or increase UV absorption," Dr. Goldenberg says.

It's not clear where the idea of using salt water to tan came from, but it may have something to do with time spent at the beach, says [Ife J. Rodney](#), MD, founding director of Eternal Dermatology + Aesthetics. "Some people may notice they tan more easily at the beach compared to, say, the pool," she says. "But that's mostly because the large mass of water and sand can reflect more of the sun's rays, giving more exposure to the skin."

While some people suggest that spritzing yourself with salt water can create a more even tan, Dr. Goldenberg says this hack may actually work against your goals. "Salt water can actually dry your skin by drawing moisture away," he says. "This can lead to irritation or uneven tanning."

The danger in salt-water tanning.

While there's no research to support using salt water to achieve a deep, even tan, there are [plenty](#) of [studies](#) that show unprotected sun exposure raises your risk of cosmetic issues like fine lines, wrinkles, brown spots, dull skin, and more. "Premature aging is caused by breakdown of collagen and elastin, resulting in wrinkles, leathery texture, and age spots," Dr. Goldenberg says. "It is estimated that up to [80 percent](#) of visible skin aging is due to UV exposure."

You've probably also heard that tanning raises your risk of skin cancer, including [melanoma](#), the most serious form of skin cancer—this is *not* a myth. "UV rays directly damage your skin's DNA, causing mutations in

skin cells, leading to cancers,” Dr. Goldenberg says. “Even a single sunburn can double your lifetime melanoma risk.”

How to protect yourself when you’re outside.

If you’re planning to be outside, Dr. Rodney recommends applying sunscreen with at least 30 SPF and reapplying it throughout the day.

Wearing a hat and sunglasses will help protect your skin, too, along with hanging in the shade as much as possible, Dr. Goldenberg says.

And, if you like the look of a tan, Dr. Rodney recommends using a [self-tanner](#). “Tanning in the sun is not the way to go,” she says. “It will age your skin and raise your risk of cancer.”

4 Self Tanners Our Editors Love

Best Foam



Bondi Sands Self Tanning Foam

[\\$24 at Amazon](#)

[\\$24 at Target](#)[\\$27 at Ulta Beauty](#)

This easy-to-use mousse goes on smoothly and is infused with aloe vera to keep skin moisturized—and your faux glow streak-free. Aside from that, it features a coconut scent that will instantly transport you to a faraway island getaway. Goals!

Best Gradual Tan Lotion



TAN-LUXE The Gradual Illuminating Tanning Lotion

Now 15% Off

~~\$34~~ [\\$29 at Amazon](#)

[\\$34 at Nordstrom](#)~~\$34~~ [\\$22 at Walmart](#)

Apply this rich moisturizer to your skin and over time (four to six hours, to be exact), the most natural-looking golden glow will develop. You can continue to apply daily to deepen your tan, stopping when you've reached the desired shade. The formula is also chock full of moisturizing ingredients (aloe vera, raspberry seed oil) and a special complex that firms skin.

Best For Face



Dr Dennis Gross Alpha Beta Glow Pad Self Tanner For Face

[\\$39 at Amazon](#)

[\\$39 at Nordstrom](#)[\\$33 at Walmart](#)

Wipe this nifty towelettes over your face in a circular motion and a beautiful golden glow will develop. They're a cinch to use and are powered by encapsulated DHA, which helps the tan to develop naturally over time. What's more, the slightly nubby texture of the pads gently exfoliates to get rid of dulling dead skin cells and each one is infused with vitamin D, an antioxidant that helps to protect against skin-aging free radical damage.

Best Tanning Drops



TAN-LUXE The Body Illuminating Self Tan Drops

[\\$29 at Amazon](#)

[\\$55 at Sephora](#)[\\$50 at Ulta Beauty](#)

Turn any moisturizer into a self-tanner by adding a few of these drops. Just mix 2 to 12 drops (depending upon the depth of color you want) to a dollop of your favorite cream and apply it all over your body—no muss, no fuss. The encapsulated DHA releases over time so your natural-looking tan will become visible in four to six hours.



[Korin Miller](#)

Korin Miller is a freelance writer specializing in general wellness, sexual health and relationships, and lifestyle trends, with work appearing in Men's Health, Women's Health, Self, Glamour, and more. She has a master's degree from American University, lives by the beach, and hopes to own a teacup pig and taco truck one day.



Reviewed by [Brian Underwood](#)

Beauty Director

Brian Underwood is beauty director at Women's Health, where he oversees content strategy for the brand across all platforms, including digital, print, and social. Underwood previously served as beauty and wellness director at Oprah Daily and O, The Oprah Magazine. During his tenure leading beauty content for the Oprah brand at Hearst, stories Underwood commissioned were awarded the Skin Cancer Foundation Media Award and a Fragrance Award for Editorial Excellence (his second). He was the launch Beauty Director of Dr. Oz THE GOOD LIFE, and has held additional editorial positions at Fitness, Organic Style, Good Housekeeping, Life & Style Weekly, and Woman's Day and has written for Self, Shape, Seventeen, Redbook, Cosmopolitan, and many more.

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