

All Your Sunscreen Questions, Answered

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Sunscreen is a wonder of technology. It's the closest thing we have to an anti-aging miracle, and it makes the outdoors safe for pale folks like me who would otherwise fry to a bright pink crisp. But we know you have questions about how to use it, and even whether you really need to use it. Here's our primer on all your sunscreen basics.

When Do I Need to Wear Sunscreen?

Dermatologists [will tell you](#), *all the dang time*. You may remember from your carefree childhood that sunscreen was just a thing for occasional beach days, because those are the only times you need to worry about sunburns. The dermatologists are right, though.

Sunburns happen when you're exposed to a lot of UVB rays from the sun. This only really happens in the middle part of the day in the summer, since that's when the sun is shining straight down on us. Once the sun's angle dips below 35 degrees, either because it's early or late in the day or because it's winter, you won't get any significant amount of UVB, and thus don't have to worry about sunburn.

But a good sunscreen will also protect your skin from UVA rays, which cause thickening and aging of the skin. They also contribute to your risk of skin cancer. Ever seen [that photo of the truck driver with lumpy, wrinkly skin on one side of his face](#)? UVA passes through windows, so even though he wasn't necessarily getting

tanned or burned, his skin still suffered the effects of UVA rays during 28 years of driving.



[Lifhacker's Essential Science-Based Guide to Skincare](#)

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Who Needs Sunscreen?

Nobody gets off easy here, sorry.

Dark skin protects you a little, but not entirely. The more melanin you have, the less likely you are to get sunburns or skin cancer. But it's not perfect protection, so dermatologists recommend using sunscreen anyway. [Consumer Reports recommends](#) a few brands that don't look ashy on dark skin, including Coppertone ClearlySheer and Banana Boat's Clear UltraMist.

Women are perhaps more likely to pay attention to the need for sunscreen, but people of all genders are at risk for skin cancer, not to mention aging and sunburns. So go ahead and use it anyway, and [rub some into your beard if you can](#).



[How to Do Skincare When You Have a Beard](#)

We recently wrote about why skincare is important, and what you need in a basic routine. Our...

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But Is It Safe?

Yes. Okay, you're rubbing chemicals into your skin pretty much every day, and it's understandable to be a little worried—but then again, you're also rubbing chemicals

on your skin any time you apply a lotion or cosmetic. Science [has not found any serious threats to your health](#) from using sunscreen.



[Your Sunscreen Is Not Going to Kill You](#)

Worried about where your sunscreen falls on the Environmental Working Group's new sunscreen...

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Coral reefs *do* have something to fear from sunscreen: The chemicals oxybenzone and octinoxate are dangerous to them, which is [why Hawaii has banned them](#). If you swim near coral reefs, avoid these ingredients. Otherwise, any sunscreen is fine.

If you're skittish about anything linked to a small risk of cancer, then look up—the *actual sun* is the bad guy here. Going out without sunscreen poses more risk to your health than any of the ingredients in sunscreens.

There aren't any effective alternatives to sunscreen, either (besides staying indoors; that works pretty well.) If somebody is trying to sell you dietary supplements to improve your sun resistance, or convince you that you can slather on some coconut oil instead, [just say no](#).



[Sunscreen Doesn't Come in a Pill or a Coconut Oil Jar](#)

There are downsides to sunscreen: it can be greasy, it's annoying to have to reapply, and from time ...

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By the way, if you're wondering *what about my tiny baby's delicate skin*, the answer there has always been to keep babies in the shade if they're under six months. This also means you don't have to worry about them sucking all the sunscreen off their hands.

How Much Do I Really Have to Use?

As much as you can. It is very unlikely that you, as a human being, will ever manage to apply enough to get the SPF on the label. Sunscreens are tested with two milligrams of product per square centimeter of skin, an amount that scientists chose for their convenience. (Spread it any thinner, and it's hard to be consistent in your testing.)



[Here's the SPF You Actually Get When You Apply Sunscreen Sparingly \[Updated\]](#)

A sunscreen labeled “SPF 15” should let you spend about 15 times as long in the sun before you...

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But most people apply a quarter of that amount, or half if they're really trying. So, sure, *try* to get that full shot glass (one ounce, or about a ping pong ball sized blob) onto your entire nearly naked beach body. But be aware that you're probably getting less protection than you think, which means:

- You can't stay out 15 times longer with SPF 15 than you would otherwise; it's [more like 3.5](#).
- High SPF sunscreen helps to make up for what you're missing. Yeah, in the lab, SPF 50 and SPF 100 are almost the same. Applied the way people do in real life, [there's a big difference](#).
- Use sleeves, hats, and shade to stay out of the sun anyway. Even the best sunscreen doesn't protect you 100 percent.



[High SPF Sunscreens Really Are Better](#)

In theory, SPF 50 and SPF 100 are very similar sunscreens: one blocks 98 percent of UVB rays, and...

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Are Sprays Okay?

Sprays work, but they come with some caveats:

- You have to make sure you apply enough—and unlike the shot glass rule for creams, there's no good benchmark for how much spray is enough. Spray until there's a visible sheen, and in theory you're supposed to rub it in. (I never do, and I'm fine. This is not medical advice though.)
- You probably don't want to breathe it in, or get it in your eyes. I use a lotion on my face (and my kids' faces) and spray everywhere else.
- Do not ever spray them near a fire.



[Sunscreen Showdown: Creams vs. Sprays](#)

Sunscreen is sunscreen, so you'd think the way you apply it doesn't really matter, but choosing...

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Can an SPF Moisturizer Replace Sunscreen?

As dermatologist Fayne Frey told us for [our skincare guide](#), SPF is a fine thing to have in moisturizers and cosmetics, but the problem is that you need to reapply the SPF throughout the day. It's unlikely there will be a product that you need to reapply the exact same amount of times as your sunscreen, so separate products are handy. Personally, I use an SPF moisturizer every morning, and then reapply a sunscreen-only product as needed.

By the way, she says it doesn't matter which goes on first, the sunscreen or the other stuff. The important thing is just to make sure you wear it.