

Sunburn

Sunburn is a common problem in children. In addition to causing painful burns, excessive sun exposure increases the risk of skin cancer, skin aging, and other skin conditions. Especially during the summer months, it's important to take steps to prevent excessive sun exposure, such as wearing sunscreen.

What is sunburn?

Sunburn is redness, pain, and sometimes other symptoms caused by ultraviolet (UV) rays from the sun. Sunburn occurs within 6 to 12 hours after skin exposure. In addition to redness and pain, it can cause tenderness of the skin, swelling, and blisters. Severe sunburn can also cause nausea, chills, and just “feeling sick.” The burned area remains red and painful for a few days. Later, peeling may occur as the skin heals.

What causes sunburn?

- Excessive exposure to sunlight on unprotected skin.
- Exposure to artificial light sources, such as sun lamps and especially tanning beds.

What are the long-term risks of sunburn and excessive sun exposure?

- ! Excessive exposure to sunlight in childhood greatly increases the risk of skin cancer later in life. It can also cause premature aging and wrinkling of the skin, actinic keratoses (rough spots and skin growths caused by sun damage), and other problems.
- Severe sunburns causing blistering when young greatly increase the risk of an especially serious type of skin cancer called *malignant melanoma*.
- Although sunburn results from a type of ultraviolet radiation called UV-B rays, the same long-term damaging effects—including skin cancer—are also caused by UV-A rays. Tanning booths, which use UV-A light, are not healthy and not recommended.

What increases your child's risk of sunburn?

- People with fair skin are at highest risk. Sunburns occur most easily and fastest in people with very light skin,

especially those with freckles or red hair and those who do not tan.

- Sunburn can also occur in people whose skin does tan and in those with darker skin, including African Americans. Getting a suntan *does not* protect against sunburn. There is no such thing as a “healthy tan”—if skin is tanned, that means it has been sun-damaged.
- Sunburn is most likely to occur if your child is out in the sun during the middle of the day, when the sun is strongest: about 10:00 a.m to 2:00 p.m. However, your child can still get enough sunlight to cause a burn at other times of day and even on hazy or partly cloudy days.
- Younger children have higher rates of sunburn, partly because they spend more time outdoors, especially in the summer. It is estimated that most people receive one half of their total lifetime dose of sunlight exposure by age 20.
- Infants and young children can quickly develop serious sunburns.

Can sunburn be prevented?

Yes. Especially if your child has fair skin and does not tan, take protective steps every time he or she is out in the sun. On sunny summer days, sunburns can occur very rapidly: after as little as 15 to 30 minutes in the sunlight!

Put on sunscreen. Make sure the sunscreen has a “sun protection factor” (SPF) of *at least* 15. (This means you can stay out in the sun 15 times longer before sunburn occurs, compared to without sunscreen.) !

- Apply sunscreen a half-hour before your child goes out in the sun. Apply again every 2 to 3 hours and after swimming or sweating.
- There is not enough information on the use of sunscreen in infants younger than 6 months old, so it is generally not recommended. Keep babies covered and out of the sun. *However*, if this is not possible, it might be best to use sunscreen.
- Wear protective clothing, especially a hat and a shirt that covers the shoulders. (Also, wear sunglasses—exposure of the eyes to UV rays increases the long-term risk of cataracts.)
- Be especially careful to provide sun protection when your child is out in the middle of the day. As much as possible, try to limit outdoor activities during the midday hours. If children are out playing or exercising on hot, sunny days, make sure they take frequent breaks for rest (out of the sun) and water. (This will also help prevent heatstroke and heat exhaustion.)

How is sunburn treated?

When sunburn occurs, your child should stay out of the sun until the burn is completely healed. Make sure he or she has on sunscreen and other sun protection before going out again.

- Apply cool washcloths to help relieve pain.
- Give anti-inflammatory pain medications, such as ibuprofen, to reduce pain and tenderness.
- Sprays and other products containing local anesthetics (such as benzocaine or lidocaine) that numb the skin may help some, but they may also cause skin rashes or irritation.
- Especially after the skin has begun to heal, apply moisturizing lotion. Products containing aloe vera may help soothe the skin.