

Sunburn

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What is sunburn?

Sunburn is the damaging effect on the skin of the ultraviolet light (UV) contained in sunlight.

What causes sunburn?

Exposing unprotected skin to too much sunlight causes the skin to become red and painful and may later peel and blister.

If you have fair skin colour or are a child, you are at greater risk of getting sunburnt. You should take extra precautions.

To prevent sunburn, apply a sunscreen with a high sun protection factor (SPF) of **at least 15 or factor 50 for young children** before going out into the sun and re-apply regularly, especially after swimming. Don't forget to protect lips, ears, hands and the back of your neck.

Avoid strong sunlight and cover up with loose clothing and a hat, especially between 11am to 3pm when the sun is strongest.

What are the symptoms?

Mildly sunburnt skin is red, sore and warm to the touch. After a few days the redness may fade to a tan. The skin may also flake and peel.

Severe sunburn may cause blistering and fever. The worst pain occurs 6-48 hours after exposure

How is it treated?

Avoid direct sunlight on affected areas until the sunburn has healed.

Cool the skin by sponging with tepid (lukewarm) water or have a cool shower or bath.

Drink plenty of non-alcoholic fluids to counteract the dehydration effects of sunburn.

Avoid alcohol.

For mild sunburn apply after sun lotion regularly to relieve the feeling of tightness.

Mild painkillers such as paracetamol or ibuprofen may be helpful. Follow the pack instructions before taking any medication.

Seek medical attention if your sunburn has caused blistering or other symptoms such as nausea, chills, fever, dizziness or generalised weakness.

What is the prognosis or expected outcome of treatment?

Mild sunburn should fade without scarring over a few days.

More severe sunburn that has caused blistering may require several dressing changes and may lead to permanent scarring.

If you are experiencing generalised effects of excess sun exposure, you may require rehydration in hospital.

Are there any possible complications?

Repeated and prolonged exposure to excessive sunlight carries the risk of causing skin cancers.

If you notice any unusual spots or changing moles you should get this checked by your GP.

Help available

Your GP's practice nurse will be able to give further information about protecting yourself from sunburn and your local pharmacist will be able to give advice on the best sun protection cream.

Further information

NHS Direct on 0845 46 47 is available 24 hours a day to provide help and advice if you have any further concerns.

www.cancerresearchuk.org/sunsmart

References

NICE Clinical Knowledge Summaries: Sunburn

ABC of Dermatology

South Western Ambulance Service Patient Information Leaflet

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) ensures that the NHS listens to patients, relatives, carers and friends, answers questions and resolves concerns as quickly as possible. If you have a query or concern call 01271 314090 or email ndht.pals@nhs.net. You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at North Devon District Hospital, Barnstaple.

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