



KidsHealth / for Parents / Sun Safety



Sun Safety



Reviewed by: [Kate M. Cronan, MD](#)



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When kids are outdoors, it's important to protect their skin to prevent melanoma and skin damage from too much sun exposure.

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Here's how to help kids enjoy fun in the sun safely.

Why Is Sun Protection Important?

We all need some sun exposure. When skin is exposed to the sun, our bodies make [vitamin D](#), which helps the body absorb [calcium](#) for stronger, healthier [bones](#). It only takes a little time in the sun for most people to get the vitamin D they need (and most vitamin D needs should be met with a healthy diet and/or supplements).

Too much unprotected exposure to the sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays can cause skin damage, eye damage, [immune system](#) suppression, and skin cancer. Even people in their twenties can develop skin cancer.

How Do Sunburns Happen?

The sun radiates light to the earth, and part of that light consists of invisible UV rays. When these rays reach the skin, they cause tanning, burning, and other skin damage.

- **UVA rays** cause skin aging and wrinkling and contribute to skin cancer, such as [melanoma](#) (the most dangerous form of skin cancer). UVA rays pass easily through the ozone layer, so they make up the majority of our sun exposure.
- **UVB rays** are also dangerous, causing sunburns, cataracts (clouding of the eye lens), and effects on the immune system. They also contribute to skin cancer, and melanoma is thought to be associated with severe UVB sunburns before age 20.

UV rays react with a chemical called **melanin** that's found in skin. A sunburn develops when the amount of UV exposure is greater than what can be protected against by the skin's melanin. The risk of damage increases with the amount and intensity of exposure. A tan is itself a sign of skin damage and does not help protect the skin.

Who Needs Sun Protection?

Every child needs sun protection. The lighter someone's natural skin color, the less melanin it has to absorb UV rays and protect itself. The darker a person's natural skin color, the more melanin it has. But both dark- and light-skinned kids need protection from UV rays because any tanning or burning causes skin damage.



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Here are the key ways to protect kids' skin:

Use Sunscreen

The American Academy of Dermatology (AAD) recommends that all kids — regardless of their skin tone — wear [sunscreen](#) with an SPF of 30 or higher. Whatever sunscreen you choose, make sure it's broad-spectrum (protects against both UVA and UVB rays) and, if kids are in or near water, is labeled water-resistant. Apply a generous amount and re-apply often.

Avoid the Strongest Rays of the Day

Try to stay in the shade when the sun is at its strongest (usually from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. in the northern hemisphere). If kids are in the sun during this time, apply and reapply sunscreen — even if they're just playing in the backyard. Most sun damage happens from exposure during day-to-day activities, not from being at the beach. Remember that even on cloudy, cool, or overcast days, UV rays reach the earth. This "invisible sun" can cause unexpected sunburn and skin damage.

Cover Up

One of the best ways to protect skin is to cover up. To make sure clothes offer enough protection, put your hand inside garments to make sure you can't see it through them.

Babies have thinner skin and underdeveloped melanin, so their skin burns easily. The best protection for babies under 6 months of age is shade, so they should be kept out of the sun whenever possible. If your baby must be in the sun, dress him or her in clothing that covers the body, including hats with wide brims to shadow the face. If your baby is younger than 6 months old and still has small areas of skin (like the face) exposed, you can use a tiny amount of SPF 15 sunscreen on those areas.

Even older kids need to escape the sun. For outdoor events, bring along a wide umbrella or a pop-up tent to play in. If it's not too hot outside and won't make kids even more uncomfortable, have them wear light long-sleeved shirts and/or long pants.

Wear Sunglasses

Sun exposure damages the eyes as well as the skin. Even 1 day in the sun can lead to a burned cornea (the outer clear membrane layer of the eye). Sun exposure over time can cause cataracts (clouding of the eye lens, which leads to blurred vision) later in life. The best way to protect eyes is to wear sunglasses that provide 100% UV protection.

Let kids pick their own pair — many options are fun, with multicolored frames or cartoon characters.

Double-Check Medicines

Some medicines make skin more sensitive to UV rays. Ask your doctor or pharmacist if any prescription (especially antibiotics and acne medicines) and over-the-counter (OTC) medicines your kids take can increase sun sensitivity. If so, take extra sun precautions. The best protection is simply covering up or staying indoors; even sunscreen can't always protect skin from sun sensitivity.

What if My Child Gets a Sunburn?

When kids get sunburned, they usually have pain and a sensation of heat — symptoms that tend to get worse several hours after sun exposure. Some also get chills. Because the sun has dried their skin, it can become itchy and tight. Sunburned skin begins to peel about a week after the sunburn. Encourage your child not to scratch or peel off loose skin because skin underneath the sunburn is at risk for infection.

To treat a sunburn:

- Have your child take a cool (not cold) bath, or gently apply cool, wet compresses to the skin to help ease pain and heat.
- Apply pure aloe vera gel (available in most drugstores) to any sunburned areas.
- Give your child an anti-inflammatory medicine like ibuprofen or use acetaminophen to ease the pain and itching. (**Do not give aspirin** to children or teens.) Over-the-counter diphenhydramine also may help reduce itching and swelling.
- Apply moisturizing cream to rehydrate the skin and treat itching. For the more seriously sunburned areas in kids over 2 years old, apply a thin layer of 1% hydrocortisone cream to help with pain. (Do **not** use petroleum-based products, because they prevent excess heat and sweat from escaping. Also, avoid first-aid products that contain benzocaine, which may cause skin irritation or allergy.)

If the sunburn is severe and blisters develop, call your doctor. Tell your child not to scratch, pop, or squeeze the blisters, which can get infected and cause scarring.

Keep your child out of the sun until the sunburn is healed. Any further sun exposure will only make the burn worse and increase pain.

What Else Should I Know?

The intensity of the sun's rays depends upon the time of year, as well as the altitude and latitude of your location. UV rays are strongest during summer. If you travel to a foreign country during its summer season, pack or buy the strongest sun protection you can find.

Extra protection is also a must near the equator, where the sun is strongest, and at high altitudes, where the air and cloud cover are thinner. Even during [winter months](#), if your family goes skiing in the mountains, be sure to apply plenty of sunscreen; UV rays reflect off both snow and water, increasing the risk of sunburn.

And be a good role model by always using sunscreen, wearing sunglasses, and limiting your time in the sun. You'll reduce your risk of sun damage and teach your kids good sun sense.

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