BEAUTY

Your Scalp Can Sunburn Too

What to do when your scalp burns-and the simple barrier that helps stop it happening again.

The burn you notice too late

You come indoors, run a hand over your head and find a tender patch that was not there that morning. By evening, your scalp feels warm and sore. The sun reached skin you did not think of as exposed, and now every touch reminds you.

A sunburn is not merely temporary redness. It means ultraviolet (UV) radiation has damaged skin cells. Ultraviolet B (UVB) rays can cause the burn itself, while ultraviolet A (UVA) rays travel more deeply into skin. Both UVA and UVB can reach the earth's surface and affect your skin.

The reaction may be delayed. Sunburn commonly appears about four hours after exposure, worsens over the following 24 to 36 hours and heals within three to five days. Depending on its severity and your skin tone, the area may look pink or red, feel warm and tender, swell or develop blisters. Headache, fever, fatigue and nausea can accompany a worse burn.

Anyone can burn, whatever their race, ethnicity or skin tone. Lighter natural skin, blue or green eyes, and blond or red hair are associated with greater risk, but they are not requirements. Sunburn at any age raises skin-cancer risk. On the scalp, repeated sun exposure can also contribute to actinic keratosis: a thick, scaly patch that can eventually become cancerous.

Cool it and stay covered

There is no quick cure for a minor sunburn. The useful work is less dramatic: ease the discomfort and prevent another dose of sunlight while the damaged skin heals. A cool bath or a cool, wet cloth can soothe the area. Moisturising cream, aloe or hydrocortisone cream may also reduce symptoms.

Drink water, particularly if the burn followed a long period outdoors. A pain reliever may help with pain, headache or fever, although some medicines-including certain nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs-can increase sensitivity to sunlight. If you take a medicine that may do this, ask a healthcare professional how that affects your sun protection rather than stopping it yourself.

Leave blisters intact. Broken blisters heal more slowly and can become infected. If blistering

occurs, the area can be covered lightly with gauze. Pus or red streaks around a blister can signal infection and need medical attention. Until the burn has healed, keep it out of further sun.

This stops being a home-care problem if you become dehydrated, develop a fever above 101°F (38.3°C), or have extreme pain lasting longer than two days. Serious burns covering more than 15% of the body also need medical care. A scalp burn alone may be small, but fever, dehydration, prolonged extreme pain or infected blisters still matter.

A tan is not protection you can bank for later.

Clouds do not cover you

Scalp sunburn is easy to file under "summer holiday mistake." The sun does not respect that category. UV rays can damage skin during any season and at any temperature. They still reach you on cloudy days and in the shade, while water, cement, sand and snow can reflect them back towards exposed skin.

Exposure is generally highest around the middle of the day. If you can, move outdoor work or recreation away from the strongest sunlight and take breaks in shade or indoors. This is especially relevant if you spend hours outside: repeated exposure increases the risk of premature skin ageing, sun spots and skin cancer.

Some medicines and skincare ingredients can make skin more sensitive to sunlight. The list includes tetracycline and sulfa antibiotics, diuretics, birth-control pills, some chemotherapy drugs, retinoids, alpha hydroxy acids, salicylic acid and benzoyl peroxide. If one applies to you, sun protection deserves more attention-not guesswork about whether your skin will tolerate the day.

Supplements are not an equivalent shortcut. A 2025 systematic review of 47 studies found the greatest evidence for photoprotection with certain polyphenols, carotenoid-based supplements and Polypodium leucotomos. But the studies were limited by small samples and short durations, and the weakest evidence concerned isolated vitamins and coenzyme Q. That uncertain evidence does not replace a physical barrier or sunscreen.

Give your scalp a barrier

For the scalp, the clearest protection is also the most literal: put something between the skin and the sun. A wide-brimmed hat shades the head as well as the face, ears and neck. Tightly woven fabric, such as canvas, offers better protection than a loose weave.

Use broad-spectrum sunscreen on scalp skin that remains exposed. "Broad-spectrum" means protection against both UVA and UVB rays. Guidance supports a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15; very light skin may need SPF 30 or higher. Sunscreen performance can be affected by perspiration, water, wind, humidity and how well it is applied, so renew the coverage after swimming or heavy sweating.

A tan is not protection you can bank for later. It is another sign of skin damage, and a so-called base tan will not prevent sunburn. Tanning beds also expose skin to UVA and UVB radiation. The darker colour may look like evidence that your skin has adapted, but it shows that UV exposure has already affected it.

Before your next outdoor day, place a wide-brimmed, tightly woven hat beside the things you will take, and add broad-spectrum sunscreen for any scalp skin the hat leaves exposed. Keep them there for the week. Prevention takes those two ordinary objects-and the decision to use them before the tenderness starts.

Where this comes from

- Sun Exposure

  MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine · https://medlineplus.gov/sunexposure.html
- Tanning

  MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine · https://medlineplus.gov/tanning.html
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