BEAUTY

Yes, Cloudy Days Still Call for Sunscreen

Clouds can soften the light without removing ultraviolet exposure, so your protection should follow your plans rather than the colour of the sky.

The sky is not a safety signal

You look outside and see a flat grey sky. The sun is nowhere obvious, the air may feel cool, and sunscreen seems like equipment for another day. If you are heading outdoors, though, the clouds have not settled the question that matters: whether ultraviolet radiation can still reach your skin.

It can. Ultraviolet (UV) rays are an invisible form of radiation, and public-health guidance explicitly warns that you still get sun exposure outdoors on cloudy days. Outdoor workers are considered at risk from UV radiation even under cloud cover. The weather can change what the day feels like without turning UV exposure off.

That distinction is easy to miss because heat, brightness and UV are not the same thing. UV rays can damage skin in any season and at any temperature. A cool face or a dim pavement does not tell you what your skin is receiving.

So the useful question is not simply whether the day looks sunny. It is what you are doing outside. A grey morning spent indoors is different from a grey afternoon walking, gardening, working or sitting outdoors. Cloud is part of the scene, not a complete protection plan.

The damage is invisible first

Sunburn is the most obvious sign of UV damage, but it is not the only one. UV rays can pass through skin and damage skin cells. Ultraviolet B (UVB) rays can cause sunburn, while ultraviolet A (UVA) rays travel more deeply into the skin. Both UVA and UVB reach the earth's surface and affect skin.

Over time, UV exposure is associated with wrinkles, dark spots and skin cancer. It can also damage the eyes. A tan does not show that your skin has adapted safely; it appears after cells have already been damaged, and some have been killed. The glow is evidence of injury, not protection from it.

That matters on cloudy days because waiting for redness is a poor way to decide whether protection was needed. By the time skin burns or tans, exposure has already happened. You

cannot reliably use discomfort as an early warning system when the radiation itself is invisible.

Clouds can therefore create a mismatch between how cautious you feel and what your skin still faces. The muted light may make a long spell outdoors seem harmless. Yet the guidance does not carve out an exception for overcast weather: people outside under clouds can still be exposed.

Cloud is part of the scene, not a complete protection plan.

Sunscreen is one layer, not the whole roof

For exposed skin, general guidance recommends sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15. It should be broad-spectrum, meaning it protects against both UVA and UVB. Guidance for very light skin recommends SPF 30 or higher.

Sunscreen performance depends on proper application and can be affected by perspiration, water, wind and humidity. It needs renewing after swimming or heavy sweating. That is true whether the sky above the water, playing field or work site is blue or grey.

But sunscreen is not asked to do everything. Protective clothing, a wide-brimmed hat and wraparound sunglasses that block UVA and UVB add physical barriers. Tightly woven fabric offers better protection than loosely woven material. Shade can reduce exposure, although being in shade does not mean there is none.

Timing matters too. Sunlight exposure is strongest around the middle of the day, and general guidance advises limiting exposure when the sun is strongest. For outdoor work, shifting tasks away from periods of greater sunlight and taking breaks in shaded or indoor areas are also recommended. The practical idea is simple: combine protection rather than treating sunscreen as permission to stay exposed indefinitely.

Some grey days deserve more attention

Cloud is not the only feature around you. Snow and light-coloured sand reflect UV light, allowing rays to reach exposed skin from above and below. An overcast day in a reflective setting is not automatically a low-exposure day simply because you cannot see a sharp shadow.

Your activities matter as well. Someone working outdoors remains exposed for as long as the work continues, and occupational guidance links outdoor sunlight exposure with increased risks of sunburn and skin cancer. A hat, protective clothing, sunglasses and sunscreen are not sunny-holiday extras in that setting; they are ways of reducing a work hazard.

Some medicines can also increase sensitivity to sunlight and the likelihood of sunburn. The guidance lists several types, including some antibiotics, diuretics and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs. If you have questions about how a medicine affects your sun sensitivity, that has moved beyond a weather judgement and into a conversation with a healthcare professional.

Skin changes deserve the same seriousness. Check regularly for new spots or changes in the size, shape, colour or feel of moles, birthmarks and existing spots, and show changes to a healthcare professional. A severe sunburn, dehydration, high fever or extreme pain that persists also needs medical attention rather than another layer of home care.

Put protection beside the door

The cloudy-day problem is often not disbelief that UV exists. It is friction. Sunshine prompts you; grey weather does not. If sunscreen lives out of sight and protective clothing is somewhere else, an ordinary overcast trip can begin before protection enters your mind.

This week, make the decision before you check whether the sky looks bright. If you expect to spend time outside, cover exposed skin with a broad-spectrum sunscreen of the appropriate SPF. Add a wide-brimmed hat, tightly woven clothing and wraparound UV-blocking sunglasses when they suit the outing. These measures work together; none requires the clouds to part first.

Keep what you need in one visible place near the door: a bottle of broad-spectrum sunscreen, a wide-brimmed hat and wraparound sunglasses. Check old sunscreen rather than assuming it will perform indefinitely; guidance for outdoor workers advises discarding products that have been kept for one to two years because they may no longer work as well.

Then use your plans, not the colour of the sky, as the cue. On Monday morning, if the day includes outdoor time, pick up those three objects before you leave. A cloudy forecast may change the view. It does not cancel UV exposure.

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



- Sun Safety Facts

  Centers for Disease Control and Prevention · https://cdc.gov/skin-cancer/sun-safety/
- Sun Exposure at Work | Outdoor | CDC

  Centers for Disease Control and Prevention · https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/outdoor-workers/about/sun-exposure.html