BEAUTY

The Sunscreen Rule Changes at Six Months

A simple age-based plan helps you protect babies and small children without asking sunscreen to do the whole job.

The outing starts before the bottle

You have packed snacks, spare clothes and everything required to move a small child a short distance. Then the sun comes out. The sunscreen question suddenly feels less simple than it did at home: which skin should you cover, how much protection is enough, and does a baby need sunscreen at all?

Start with the part that sunscreen cannot change. Ultraviolet (UV) rays are invisible radiation that can damage skin cells. Sunburn is evidence of that damage, not merely temporary redness, and sunburn at any age increases the risk of skin cancer. A tan is damage too, rather than a healthy stage before burning.

Children can be exposed when the weather does not look especially sunny. UV rays reach skin on cloudy and cool days, and they can reflect from water, cement, sand and snow. Protection matters throughout the year, not only on hot beach days. Anyone can burn, whatever their race, ethnicity or skin tone.

That sounds like an argument for putting sunscreen everywhere. For babies in their first six months, however, the advice goes in a different direction: sunscreen is not recommended. The priority is keeping the infant out of midday sun and using protective clothing when being outside cannot be avoided. Age changes the plan.

Under six months, build shade first

For a baby aged six months or younger, think about the surroundings before thinking about a product. Shade from an umbrella, tree or other shelter reduces exposure. Clothing can cover the arms and legs, while a hat with a brim all the way around can shade the face, ears and back of the neck.

Fabric matters. Tightly woven material offers better protection than loosely woven material, and a wet T-shirt protects less well than a dry one. A wide-brimmed hat made from tightly woven fabric provides more coverage than a straw hat with holes that allow sunlight through.

Timing helps as well. UV rays are strongest around the middle of the day; general guidance

places that period between late morning and late afternoon, with some advice using the narrower window of 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Rather than trying to reconcile the clocks exactly, treat midday as the time to be especially deliberate about shade and coverage.

Shade is important, but it is not a force field. UV exposure still occurs in shade, so clothing and a hat remain part of the plan. If the baby must be outside, the aim is not to find one perfect defence. It is to put several ordinary barriers between delicate skin and direct sun.

This is also where the limits of the available guidance matter. It does not support choosing a particular infant sunscreen formula, ingredient or brand. The clearest recommendation for this age group is not a shopping decision at all. It is less direct sun, especially around midday, plus clothing that covers.

Sunscreen has joined the kit; it has not replaced the rest of it.

After six months, sunscreen joins the team

Once your child is older than six months, sunscreen can cover skin that clothing leaves exposed. Choose broad-spectrum protection, meaning it filters both ultraviolet A (UVA) and ultraviolet B (UVB) rays, with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 15 or higher. A higher SPF number indicates more protection.

Sunscreen works best as one part of the plan, not as permission to stay indefinitely in direct sun. Shade, long sleeves, long trousers or skirts, a beach cover-up and a wide-brimmed hat all reduce how much skin is exposed. The sunscreen is there for the gaps.

Put a thick layer on all exposed skin before going outside. Sunscreen wears off, so it needs to go on again during a long outing and after swimming, sweating or towelling off. Those moments matter because they are easy to miss while you are managing wet clothes, food and the next activity.

Do not forget the eyes. Sunglasses that block UVA and UVB rays protect the eyes and surrounding skin; wraparound styles provide the most protection because they reduce rays entering from the sides. Sunglasses add protection, but they do not replace a brim that shades the face and ears.

The evidence supplied here does not establish that one child-focused texture or fashionable ingredient protects better than another. What it does support is more basic and more useful: broad-spectrum coverage, SPF 15 or higher, a thick application, reapplication when protection may have worn away, and physical cover alongside it.

The burn is the line

If your child's skin becomes redder than usual, warm, tender or painful, treat that as sunburn and move out of the sun. Sunburn can continue to worsen for 24 to 36 hours and commonly heals within three to five days. Until it has healed, the child should stay out of the sun.

More severe burns can swell or blister. A child may also develop a headache or fever, feel unusually tired or feel sick to their stomach. Cool baths or a cool wet cloth can ease symptoms, and moisturizing cream or aloe can be applied to the affected area. Blisters can be lightly bandaged to help prevent infection.

This is where sun protection stops being only an outing problem. Seek medical advice for a serious burn covering a large area, dehydration, extreme pain lasting more than two days, a fever above 101°F or 38.3°C, or signs of infection such as pus or red streaks around blisters.

Supplements do not offer a reliable shortcut. A 2025 systematic review of 47 human studies found some evidence of photoprotection from certain polyphenols, carotenoids and Polypodium leucotomos, but the research was limited by small samples and short studies. Evidence was weakest for isolated vitamins and coenzyme Q. None of that replaces shade, clothing and sunscreen.

The practical goal is not to prevent your child from ever being outdoors. It is to stop ordinary outdoor time becoming unnecessary UV damage. Spending time outside and protecting skin can coexist, but only if protection is part of the plan before redness appears.

Pack one small sun kit

Before the next outing, put together one sun kit and leave it with the things you already take. For a baby six months or younger, it takes a wide-brimmed hat, tightly woven covering clothes and access to an umbrella, tree or other shelter. Plan the outing around shade rather than around sunscreen.

For a child older than six months, add broad-spectrum SPF 15-or-higher sunscreen for exposed skin and sunglasses that block UVA and UVB rays. Keep the hat and covering clothes. Sunscreen has joined the kit; it has not replaced the rest of it.

Check the sunscreen's expiration date before you rely on it. If there is no expiration date, guidance gives it a shelf life of no more than three years, and less if it has been exposed to high temperatures. A forgotten container that has spent a long time in heat may not be the dependable backup you hoped it was.

On Monday, place the hat, dry covering clothes, sunglasses and sunscreen together beside the child's usual outdoor bag. Add an umbrella if shade will not be available. The point is not a

perfect routine. It is that when the door opens and the sun is already bright, everything the next decision takes is within reach.

Where this comes from

- Sun Exposure

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- Tanning

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