BEAUTY

Sunscreen Is Only One Part of Sun Protection

Shade, clothing, timing and sunglasses can reduce ultraviolet exposure-and unlike sunscreen, they cannot wear or wash off.

The bottle cannot do everything

You have put on sunscreen, stepped outside and mentally ticked off sun protection for the day. Then the hours stretch, the shade moves, your shirt gets wet and the sunscreen begins to wear off. The bottle mattered. It was never meant to carry the whole job.

Ultraviolet (UV) rays are invisible radiation that can pass into skin and damage its cells. Ultraviolet B (UVB) can cause sunburn, while ultraviolet A (UVA) travels more deeply into skin. Both can contribute to skin cancer, and UV exposure can also damage the eyes. A burn is visible evidence of damage, but a tan is damage too-not a protective or healthy glow.

Protection matters beyond bright summer afternoons. UV rays can reach you during any season and at any temperature, including on cloudy or cool days. Water, cement, sand and snow can reflect them. Shade helps, but reflected or indirect exposure means that sitting beneath a tree or umbrella does not make every other precaution unnecessary.

Sunscreen remains useful: broad-spectrum means it filters both UVA and UVB, while sun protection factor (SPF) rates how well it filters UV rays. But sunscreen wears off and needs to be reapplied after extended time outside, swimming, sweating or towelling. Clothing, shade, timing and sunglasses reduce how much exposed skin and eye tissue the sunscreen must defend in the first place.

Make less sun reach you

The most straightforward protection is distance from direct sunlight. Shade beneath a tree, umbrella or other shelter can reduce the risk of sun damage and skin cancer. If you control the setting, choose a shaded place before you settle in rather than waiting until your skin feels hot. Feeling cool is not proof that UV exposure has stopped.

Timing changes the exposure too. General guidance places the strongest sunlight around the middle of the day, although the cited ranges vary from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. The practical point is not minute-by-minute precision. When you have a choice, move an outdoor task, walk or break away from midday and towards morning or later afternoon.

That choice may be especially important if being outdoors is your job rather than your recreation. Workplaces can schedule outdoor tasks when sunlight is lower, rotate workers, and provide shaded or indoor break areas. If you cannot choose your working hours, shaded breaks and protective clothing become more important, not less.

Clouds do not turn an exposed place into shade. Nor does winter remove UV risk. Snow and light-coloured sand can reflect radiation so that it reaches exposed skin from below as well as above. The useful question is not simply whether the day feels sunny. It is how much uncovered skin and unprotected eye area you are presenting to direct and reflected light.

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Wear the barrier

Clothing is sun protection you do not have to spread evenly or remember to reapply. Long sleeves and long trousers or skirts cover the most skin. When those are impractical, a T-shirt or beach cover-up still reduces exposure. Tightly woven fabric offers better protection than a loose weave, and darker clothing may protect more than lighter clothing.

Condition matters. A wet T-shirt does not protect as well as a dry one. That makes a dry cover-up useful after swimming, even when you used sunscreen beforehand. Some clothing is certified for UV protection, but ordinary tightly woven fabric can also be part of the plan. The important feature is the physical barrier, not an elaborate outfit.

A hat should shade more than the top of your head. A brim running all the way around can cover the face, ears and back of the neck; tightly woven material works better than straw with holes that admit sunlight. A baseball cap leaves the ears and neck exposed, so those areas still need clothing, shade or sunscreen.

Sunglasses belong in the same category as hats, not merely as a comfort accessory. UV exposure can harm the eyes, and sunglasses also protect the surrounding skin. Look for lenses that block both UVA and UVB. A wraparound shape provides more coverage because it limits rays entering from the sides.

These barriers work with sunscreen rather than competing against it. Sunscreen belongs on skin that remains exposed, including easily missed areas such as ears, scalp, lips, neck, feet and the backs of hands. A shirt and hat simply shrink that list. The less uncovered skin you have, the fewer places depend entirely on a layer that can wear away.

Be sceptical of protection you swallow

The appeal of a "sun-protection" supplement is obvious: swallow something, then worry less about shade, sleeves and reapplication. The evidence does not support treating a capsule as a portable roof. None of the supplied guidance presents supplements as a replacement for clothing, shade, sunglasses or broad-spectrum sunscreen.

A 2025 systematic review examined 47 human studies of dietary supplements and photoprotection. The products studied included carotenoids, polyphenols, Polypodium leucotomos, vitamins, coenzyme Q, fatty acids and mixed formulations. The strongest evidence within that group concerned polyphenols, carotenoid-based supplements and Polypodium leucotomos; isolated vitamins and coenzyme Q had the weakest evidence.

That ranking sounds clearer than the underlying research is. The review found that studies were limited by small samples and short duration, and it said more research was needed to determine effective amounts and duration. Some ingredients may enhance photoprotection, particularly for people predisposed to UV sensitivity, but "may enhance" is not the same as preventing burns or skin cancer during ordinary sun exposure.

A supplement cannot cast shade, cover your neck or stop reflected UV reaching your eyes. The evidence is too limited to let it replace established physical protection. If you have unusual sensitivity to sunlight, or take medicines that increase sun sensitivity, that stops being a shopping question and becomes one for your health care provider.

Pack the protection you can hold

On Monday, put together a small sun kit before you leave home: a wide-brimmed, tightly woven hat; wraparound sunglasses that block UVA and UVB; a dry, tightly woven cover-up or long-sleeved shirt; and broad-spectrum sunscreen. If shade will not be available, add an umbrella. The kit works because each object closes a different gap.

Then make one change that costs nothing: choose shade and move flexible outdoor plans away from the middle of the day. Keep using protection on cloudy and cool days. Avoid tanning beds and sunlamps; they expose skin to damaging UV, and a "base tan" is already skin damage rather than preparation for safer sun.

Once a month, check your skin for new spots or changes in the size, shape, colour or feel of existing moles and marks. Take new or changing areas to a health care provider. After a severe sunburn, seek medical attention if it covers a large part of your body, you are dehydrated, have a high fever, or extreme pain lasts longer than 48 hours.

The aim is not to make outdoor life impossible. It is to stop asking one disappearing layer of sunscreen to do everything. A hat, sunglasses, a cover-up and an umbrella are visible

reminders that sun protection is not a product you apply once. It is a place you choose, a barrier you wear and a plan you carry.

Where this comes from

- Sun Exposure

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- Tanning

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