BEAUTY

The Sun-Protected Places You Keep Missing

A better sun routine starts at the edges: ears, hands, feet, scalp and the strip of neck your usual habits leave exposed.

The burn at the edges

You remember your face. Perhaps your shoulders get a quick pass too. Then, hours later, the evidence appears somewhere oddly specific: the rim of an ear, the back of your neck or the tops of your feet. Sun protection often fails at the edges.

Those small exposed areas are not trivial. Ultraviolet (UV) rays can pass through skin and damage skin cells. Sunburn is a visible sign of that damage, while a tan means skin cells have already been harmed. Neither is evidence that your skin has adapted safely to the sun.

The exposure does not have to happen on a blazing summer afternoon. UV rays can reach you during any season, at any temperature and on cloudy days. Water, cement, sand and snow can reflect them. Shade reduces exposure, but it does not make uncovered skin untouchable.

That is why the places people miss matter. The ears, scalp, lips, neck, tops of the feet and backs of the hands are all areas that outdoor-work guidance singles out for special attention. They sit just beyond the parts many sun-protection habits appear to cover.

Your clothes draw the map

What needs protection changes with what you are wearing. A baseball cap shades part of your face but leaves your ears and the back of your neck exposed. Sandals uncover the tops of your feet. Short sleeves move the boundary to your arms, while an open neckline creates another strip of exposed skin.

A hat with a brim all the way around can shade your face, ears and the back of your neck. Tightly woven fabric offers better protection than loosely woven material, and darker clothing may protect more than lighter clothing. A wet T-shirt is less protective than a dry one.

Clothing is useful because it replaces a patch-by-patch job with a physical barrier. Long sleeves and long trousers or skirts cover more skin when they are practical. Sunscreen still has a role on everything left exposed, including the backs of your hands after the sleeves end.

Eyes belong in the same plan. UV exposure can damage them as well as skin. Sunglasses that

block both ultraviolet A (UVA) and ultraviolet B (UVB) rays offer the best protection, and a wraparound shape helps stop rays coming in from the sides.

No supplement makes a forgotten ear sun-safe.

Clouds do not finish the job

The day can feel mild and still carry UV exposure. Cool air does not cancel radiation, and clouds do not block all of it. This is where sensation becomes an unreliable guide: you cannot see UV rays, and the weather does not have to feel harsh for exposed skin to be damaged.

The strongest sunlight generally falls around the middle of the day. Planning outdoor tasks for times with less sunlight, taking breaks in shade and using an umbrella, tree or shelter can reduce exposure. But protective clothing and sunscreen remain useful in shade because reflected and indirect UV rays can still reach you.

Sunscreen should be broad-spectrum, meaning it filters both UVA and UVB rays. General guidance supports a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15, while guidance for people working outdoors calls for SPF 30 or higher. It works best as one part of protection, alongside clothing, a hat, sunglasses and shade.

Sunscreen also wears off. Swimming, heavy sweating and towelling can remove it, so it needs to be put on again afterward. Heat can shorten its shelf life, and an expired product should be replaced. The important shift is to stop treating one morning application as permanent armour.

Damage is not a beauty problem

Repeated UV overexposure is linked with premature wrinkling, age spots and a higher risk of skin cancer. A 2022 systematic review identified sun exposure as one of seven notable risk factors for skin ageing. The familiar signs on exposed skin are not simply a question of looking older; they reflect environmental damage layered onto chronological ageing.

It is tempting to look for a product that can undo that history. A 2024 systematic review found evidence that several topical cosmetic ingredients, including botanicals, peptides and hydroquinone, can treat photodamaged skin. That is different from preventing the next round of UV damage, which still requires reducing exposure.

Collagen supplements offer a useful warning about confident beauty claims. A 2021 review of 19 trials reported improvements in wrinkles, hydration and elasticity. But a 2025 review of 23 randomised controlled trials found no benefit in high-quality studies or in studies without pharmaceutical-company funding. It concluded that clinical evidence does not currently

support collagen supplements for preventing or treating skin ageing.

No supplement makes a forgotten ear sun-safe. The practical tools are less glamorous: shade, covering clothes, a brimmed hat, UV-blocking sunglasses and broad-spectrum sunscreen on exposed skin. Sun protection acts before the damage you are hoping another product might later soften.

Do an edge check Monday

Before you go out on Monday, put your clothes on first. Then look at the borders they create. Notice the ears outside your hat, the neck above your collar, the scalp visible through uncovered areas, the hands beyond your cuffs and the feet left open by your shoes.

This takes broad-spectrum sunscreen, a wide-brimmed hat, wraparound UV-blocking sunglasses and tightly woven clothing that covers as much skin as is practical. Use the sunscreen on every exposed area, paying particular attention to the ears, lips, neck, scalp, backs of the hands and tops of the feet.

Keep the same objects available when you expect to remain outside, because sunscreen needs replacing after swimming, heavy sweating or towelling. Seek shade where you can. If a baseball cap is the hat you have, cover the ears and back of the neck with clothing or sunscreen rather than assuming the cap has handled them.

Check your skin regularly too. A new spot, or a change in the size, shape, colour or feel of a mole, birthmark or existing spot, is no longer a sunscreen question; take it to a healthcare professional. This week, however, begin with the simpler task: dress, find the edges and cover what is still exposed.

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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