BEAUTY

What Actually Helps After a Sunburn

A simple four-step routine can ease the next few days, protect damaged skin and show you when home care is no longer enough.

Step 1: Cool it with water and cloth

You come indoors, catch your reflection and find the colour deepening across your shoulders. The temptation is to search for a miracle jar. Start with something less dramatic: a cool bath or a clean cloth soaked in cool water. Either can reduce the discomfort while your skin begins to recover.

Do not judge the full burn by how it looks at first. Sunburn commonly gets worse over the next 24 to 36 hours, then heals in about three to five days. That lag explains why skin that seemed merely warm outdoors may become painful later. The useful move now is cooling, not chasing an instant reversal.

A sunburn is visible evidence of damage from ultraviolet (UV) radiation. UVB rays can cause the burn itself, while UVA rays travel more deeply into the skin. Cooling may make you feel better, but it does not erase that damage. No after-sun product can turn the exposure into a harmless one.

Keep the burned area out of the sun while it heals. This is not the moment to cover the redness with a tan: tanning outdoors or in a tanning bed adds more UV exposure and more skin damage. A so-called base tan will not prevent another sunburn.

Step 2: Ease it with moisturiser, water and pain relief

Once the skin is cool, a moisturising cream, aloe or hydrocortisone cream can reduce sunburn symptoms. These are comfort measures rather than repairs for the UV damage. You do not need to layer several of them or build an elaborate skin-care routine around a short list of options.

For pain, headache or fever, a pain reliever may help. Drinking plenty of water is also part of basic sunburn care. That makes the useful kit refreshingly ordinary: cool water, one soothing topical product, drinking water and, if you need it, a pain reliever.

Aloe appears in both everyday advice and burn research, but those are not quite the same question. A 2017 systematic review examined 56 randomised controlled trials involving 5,807

people with burn wounds. Most participants had recent second-degree burns affecting less than 40% of the body, and most were adults. That evidence cannot neatly tell you which over-the-counter after-sun product is best for an uncomplicated sunburn.

The same review assessed aloe, silver treatments, honey, iodine and several other antiseptics. Much of the evidence was of low or very low certainty, and trial methods were often poorly reported. Some comparisons suggested faster healing with particular treatments, but infection and healing outcomes were frequently missing or incomplete. The honest conclusion is not that your kitchen or bathroom contains a proven burn cure.

Honey and specialised silver dressings produced some promising results in particular clinical comparisons, but that does not make either a necessary home remedy for ordinary red, tender skin. The trials included burn wounds and unconventional comparison treatments, not a clean contest between familiar sunburn lotions. For routine relief, the supported choices remain modest: cooling, moisturising cream, aloe or hydrocortisone cream, water and pain relief.

A large, blistering or infected burn is not a skin-care problem to solve by adding another cream.

Step 3: Protect blisters with a light bandage

A more severe sunburn may swell or blister. If blisters appear, use a light bandage to protect the area from infection. Broken blisters take longer to heal and can become infected, so this stage deserves more care than uncomplicated redness.

If a blister breaks and the skin begins to peel, remove dried skin and apply an antibiotic ointment or hydrocortisone cream. This is also where claims about antiseptics should be kept in proportion. The 2017 review could not establish with confidence whether antiseptic treatments increased or reduced infection compared with topical antibiotics; the certainty was very low.

Home care stops being the main question if the burn covers more than about 15% of your body-roughly your whole back or one whole leg, or both arms-or if you are dehydrated. Seek medical care for a fever above 101°F (38.3°C), extreme pain lasting more than two days, or possible blister infection such as pus or red streaks.

Headache, fever, marked tiredness and nausea can occur with severe sunburn. If you feel seriously unwell or are uncertain about the extent of the burn, contact a health professional. A large, blistering or infected burn is not a skin-care problem to solve by adding another cream.

Step 4: Build next week around shade, clothing and sunscreen

Once the soreness begins to fade, the job changes. Sunburn at any age increases the risk of skin cancer, and anyone can burn regardless of race, ethnicity or skin tone. UV exposure can also contribute to premature skin ageing, dark spots and eye damage. The practical goal is not guilt. It is making the next exposure less likely.

For your next outdoor day, gather a broad-spectrum sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15, a wide-brimmed hat, tightly woven clothing that covers your arms and legs, and wraparound sunglasses that block UVA and UVB rays. Shade matters too. Sun reaches you on cloudy or cool days and can reflect from water, cement, sand and snow.

Some medicines and skin-care ingredients can make skin more sensitive to sunlight. The listed examples include certain antibiotics, diuretics, birth-control pills and chemotherapy drugs, as well as retinoids, alpha hydroxy acids, salicylic acid and benzoyl peroxide. If that might explain an unexpected burn, ask a health professional about the medicine or product rather than stopping it on your own.

On Monday, put the hat, covering layer, sunglasses and sunscreen together where you prepare to go outside. That small bit of staging takes four ordinary objects and a place to keep them. It will not undo this burn, but it turns the lesson into something you can actually use next week.

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
- Preventing Sunburn | Skin Cancer | CDC

  Centers for Disease Control and Prevention · https://www.cdc.gov/skin-cancer/prevention/sunburn.html
- Antiseptics for burns.

  The Cochrane database of systematic reviews, 2017 · https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28700086/
- The Effect of Amino Acids on Wound Healing: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis on Arginine and Glutamine.

  Nutrients, 2021 · https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34444657/