BEAUTY

Do After-Sun Products Actually Do Anything?

They may soothe a burn, but the useful part is simpler-and less miraculous-than the bottle suggests.

The bottle arrives after the damage

You come indoors pink, hot and tender, and reach for the cold bottle marked "after-sun." It feels like the responsible thing to do. Perhaps, beneath that, you hope it can reverse the afternoon.

It cannot. Sunburn means ultraviolet (UV) radiation has already damaged skin cells. A tan is also evidence of damage, not a protective or healthy stage that an after-sun product can somehow make safe. That matters because sunburn increases your risk of skin cancer, while repeated UV exposure is linked to premature skin ageing and skin spots.

The useful distinction is between repairing the damage and making the next few days more bearable. There is no quick cure for a minor sunburn. Supportive care can cool the skin, ease pain and reduce dryness while the burn settles, but it does not cancel the UV exposure that caused it.

Sunburn often becomes worse over the first 24 to 36 hours and usually heals within three to five days. That delayed peak helps explain why a mild flush at the beach can feel much more uncomfortable the following morning. After-sun belongs in that window as comfort, not reversal.

What earns its place

The strongest case for any after-sun product is not that it is specially formulated for sunshine. It is that it performs the ordinary job of a moisturiser or bland emollient. Guidance for sunburn includes applying a moisturising cream, while clinical travel guidance names petrolatum and zinc oxide as examples of bland topical emollients used for supportive care.

Cooling matters too. Cool baths, showers or wet compresses are first-line ways to relieve discomfort. Refrigerating a bland emollient before applying it may provide additional relief. That can make a chilled lotion feel impressive, but some of the effect may simply come from temperature and moisturising rather than a distinctive "after-sun" property.

A 2023 umbrella review of 12 systematic reviews found that structured skin care using

low-irritating cleansers and leave-on products was beneficial for maintaining skin integrity across several skin conditions. It was not a review of sunburn or after-sun products, so it cannot prove that a particular lotion treats a burn. It does support the less glamorous principle behind useful aftercare: be gentle and leave moisture on the skin.

This means a dedicated bottle may be convenient, but the evidence supplied here does not establish that products carrying the after-sun name are better than a bland moisturiser. The job that earns a place is straightforward: cool, moisturise and soothe.

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Aloe has a softer claim

Aloe vera is closely associated with sunburn, and general guidance lists aloe alongside moisturising cream and 1% hydrocortisone cream as options that may reduce symptoms. More detailed clinical guidance is less certain: studies assessing aloe for sunburn have produced equivocal results.

That is not the same as saying aloe does nothing. It means the available evidence does not settle how much benefit it adds. If an aloe product feels soothing, that can fit within symptom care. The evidence does not justify treating aloe as an antidote to UV damage or as an essential ingredient every sunburn needs.

Hydrocortisone occupies a different category. Guidance says a 1% hydrocortisone cream or ointment can decrease pain and inflammation, and general advice includes it among topical options. It is still symptom relief, not a way to hasten recovery from cellular damage. Systemic steroids do not improve sunburn symptoms or speed healing.

The honest answer, then, is not that every after-sun product is pointless or that all formulas are interchangeable. It is that the evidence supports a few modest functions and does not support a miracle. A cool, bland moisturiser may do the relevant work; aloe's additional benefit remains uncertain.

The burn sets the rules

Once skin is burned, the first priority is to stop adding exposure. Stay out of the sun until the burn has healed. If you must be outdoors later, protection includes shade, clothing that covers the skin, a wide-brimmed hat, wraparound sunglasses and broad-spectrum sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15.

A bottle of after-sun offers no protection against tomorrow's UV radiation. Nor does a tan. Ultraviolet A (UVA) can reach more deeply into skin and contributes to premature ageing, while ultraviolet B (UVB) is a major cause of sunburn. Both can cause sunburn, which is why broad-spectrum protection matters.

Blisters change the calculation. Intact blisters should generally not be deliberately broken, because broken blisters take longer to heal and can become infected. If covering them, use a loose dressing that will not rub away the blister roof. Extensive blistering can require medical care for fluids and pain control.

This stops being a bathroom-cabinet problem if the burn covers more than about 15% of your body-such as your whole back or leg, or both arms-or if you are dehydrated. Seek medical help for a fever above 101°F (38.3°C), extreme pain lasting more than two days, or possible infection shown by pus or red streaks. Headache, fever, nausea and marked tiredness can accompany a severe burn.

Build a small cooling kit

For the next week, skip the search for a heroic after-sun formula. Put together what the evidence actually supports: a clean cloth for a cool wet compress, a bland moisturising cream or emollient, drinking water and loose gauze in case blisters need protection. Keep the moisturiser cool if that makes it more comfortable to apply.

Use the cloth or a cool bath to settle the heat, then apply the moisturiser gently. Drink water, rest somewhere cool and keep the burned area out of further sun until it has healed. If you already own an aloe product, its role is optional comfort; the evidence does not show that aloe is the part doing indispensable repair.

Then add the objects that prevent a repeat: covering clothes, a wide-brimmed hat, wraparound sunglasses and broad-spectrum sunscreen. UV exposure can occur on cloudy or cool days, and water, sand, cement and snow can reflect radiation. Protection is not only for beach weather.

The point of the kit is not to make sunburn harmless. It is to replace a vague promise with a workable plan. On Monday, check the burn in good light, cool it with the cloth, moisturise it and pack the hat, covering clothes, sunglasses and sunscreen before you go outside. That is what aftercare can honestly do-and what it takes.

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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