

Sun Exposed: The Truth About Suntans

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It's that time of year – gardens are in bloom, school is out, summer sports are in full swing, and cold watermelon by the poolside never tasted so delicious! Sounds like Paradise, right? Well, it could be... as long as you don't forget the sunscreen.

Throughout most of ancient history, a suntan was only typical of poor servants that worked outside, not of wealth and royalty. Women would take extreme measures to protect their perfectly creamy complexions. It wasn't until the 1920s that being bronze became the fad when style icon Coco Chanel came back from a vacation with a tan. Over the next several years, the sight of a suntan meant you had money and lots of leisurely time to be spent basking in the sun. Today, this golden glow remains a "must have" in many wardrobes, and tanning salons and beaches around the world are flourishing with seekers of the perfect tan. Unfortunately, now with the rise of skin cancer and other sun-related skin illnesses, we have learned a tough lesson. The "sunny side of the truth" is not exactly a good thing.

What exactly is a "tan"? **A tan is actually the result of injury to your skin.** Your skin is producing more melanin and getting darker as a warning sign that says, "Hey! I'm frying here!" It starts with a burn, turns into a tan, and eventually can lead to freckles and sun spots. I hate to say it, but those cute little freckles can actually signify the early stages of skin cancer from sun damaged skin.

"But I tan indoors, so it's safe... right?" WRONG! As a former uneducated employee of a tanning salon, I was told to tell customers that the tanning beds were safe because they had "controlled amounts of UV rays", and some of the beds specialized in using UVA rays rather than UVB rays, so it was "impossible to burn". Let's get real here, folks. Just because the UV rays are "controlled" does not mean they are safe. (Poison is controlled when it's put into a bottle, but it can still kill you if you take the cap off and drink it.) Even though tanning beds limit the amount of time you can be exposed to the UV rays, you are still exposed. So what's the difference between UVA and UVB rays? **UVA = Aging rays** and **UVB = Burning rays**. Simply put, the UVB rays are the rays that hit the surface of your skin and do the most damage on the top. The UVA rays penetrate deeper into the skin, doing the damage to the inside. Sure, those beds that shoot out large amounts of UVA rays will give you a longer lasting tan without the burn, but only because they have done more permanent damage to the deepest layers of your skin.

So how do you avoid sun exposure? You really can't. Even when you're inside your house or car, UVA rays are seeping through your windows, so you can never truly escape the sun. But there are precautions you can (and should) take. First and foremost, **invest in a good daily sunscreen.** There are hundreds of varieties available now, ranging in SPFs (Sun Protection Factors) of anywhere from 2 to 100. These numbers tell you the product's ability to deflect the sun's rays. Without getting into too much scientific detail, just know that a sunscreen with a SPF of 2 can only protect you from 50% of the sun's rays, while a SPF of 15 protects against 93% of rays, and a SPF of 30 protects against 97% of rays, all when used properly. Look for a "Broad Spectrum" sunscreen that fights both UVB *and* UVA rays. For everyday use, you should always use at least a SPF of 15. When you plan to be outdoors, even on cloudy days, for more than twenty minutes, you should apply a sunscreen with at least SPF 30. Be sure to look for both sunscreen for the body, and sunscreen specifically designed for the face in order to avoid clogged pores. (For sensitive skin, choose a sunscreen with the natural active ingredients Zinc Oxide and Titanium Dioxide.) Always be sure to read the directions for proper application instructions, and don't forget to **reapply often** for proper protection. Don't forget the commonly missed areas of the body: lips, ears, back of neck, hands, and tops *and* bottoms of feet!

Can't live without that golden tan look? After you invest in a good sunscreen, **buy yourself a good sunless self-tanner or bronzer.** There are as many options out there as there are options for sunscreens. Yes, there *are* self-tanners that won't turn you orange and streaky! Gradual self-tanners are becoming more popular because of their more natural look and scent, but don't be afraid to try several different kinds. Do your research and experiment to find one that best suits your skin.

Leave the baking to the cookies... not your skin! Stay skin-safe, and enjoy the rest of your summer!

Recommended Sunblocks:

- **Alba Botanica Mineral sunscreen for the face, SPF 20** (*Great for sensitive skin and eyes!*)
- **Equate or Ocean Potion brand Clear Zinc Oxide for the face, SPF 50+**

