

Stinging Eyes? 3 Fixes for Sunscreen Hassles

After reading a new Consumer Reports survey showing that 31 percent of Americans never, ever use sunscreen, I'm thinking perhaps not enough of us have met someone with melanoma. (Perhaps we should all have watched the season finale of Grey's Anatomy, in which a main character dies from the deadly skin cancer.) Less than half of women are likely to slather on lotion even when they're planning on spending two to four hours in the sun. Yet 22 percent of the 1,000 men and women polled reported that they'd been examined by a doctor for something they thought might be skin cancer. Are at least these folks protecting themselves?

Being outdoors for 10 to 15 minutes in the midday sun isn't harmful and can actually help your body produce plentiful amounts of vitamin D, as I previously reported. But you really do need sun protection if you're going to spend more time outdoors. Only 25 percent of the women and 15 percent of the men said they wore sunscreen, for example, when running. After getting a bad burn during a marathon along the New Jersey shore, I now keep sunscreen in my gym bag at work for my afternoon runs.

Why are we so reluctant to wear sunscreen? When polled about sunscreen concerns, the survey respondents named "getting it in your eyes" as the biggest problem. Cost, skin irritations, and difficulty of applying it evenly were other factors. And 41 percent of occasional users said they hated having sand stick to their skin. (Now that one is just ridiculous, given that this happens, with sunscreen or without, the minute you lie back down after taking a swim.)

What can we do to overcome the other downsides? I posed this question to Jennifer Stein, a dermatologist at New York University's Lagone Medical Center who spends her days checking patients for skin cancers.

Cost: Buy the cheapest brand you can find, she says, since the expensive ones don't do any better job than generic versions. And there's no need to pay more for a sky-high SPF. An SPF of 15 is good, Stein says, and once you go above 30, you're not getting significantly more protection. Far more important: Get a product that blocks out both UVB rays (the ones that cause burning) and UVA rays—both of which increase your risk of skin cancer. Products containing zinc oxide or titanium dioxide, which physically block rays, protect against both types of radiation. Those with chemical blockers like octinoxate or octisalate (which protect against UVB rays) should also contain helioplex or mexoryl, which are stabilized forms of UVA-blocking Parsol 1789. You can also save money by buying combination products. My under-eye concealer and moisturizer both contain sunscreen. Many liquid foundations have it, too. Here are

Getting it in your eyes: Speaking from personal experience, those teary, irritated eyes can really ruin a day. "Look for ones labeled for sensitive skin," advises Stein. Or, she adds, those marketed as moisturizers, which sometimes rub in better and are less likely to drip from the forehead into the eyes. When I go running, I use a product that specifically says it won't irritate the eyes. But on really hot days, I also wear a headband to mop up the lotion-tinged sweat.

Dealing with rashes. Try a sunscreen with a physical blocker like zinc oxide, advises Stein, which tends to be less irritating to the skin than the chemical blockers. And if your skin just can't handle any product, cover up with clothes or sit under a beach umbrella. Both will protect you if you're loath to wear sunscreen, and you won't fret about reaching that difficult spot on your back. Plus, you won't need to remember to keep reapplying sunscreen every two hours while you're in the sun.

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