



HEAL THE

BURN

The third degree on hot skin

by Louis Clemente

Now you've really done it: After an afternoon of high seas sailing—or maybe just several hours of poolside snoozing—you're toasted. Red as a lobster. Burned to a crisp. Everything hurts.

We've all sustained sunburn, but few of us would risk another if we knew just how serious the damage from one can be. Sunburn is produced when the ultraviolet rays in sunlight damage the deeper layers of the skin. The resulting irritation to the skin, blood vessels, and associated tissue causes the inflammation we've come to call sunburn. The accompanying pain comes from the nerve cells within the skin, which are stimulated during the inflammation process. But that ache is a lousy indicator of when it's time to come in out of the sun: It can take up to twelve hours after sun exposure for the pain to start. The degree of pain is directly related to the severity of the burn and the size of the affected skin area.

There's no such thing as a better sunburn, but some are less dangerous than others. A typical sunburn—referred to as a superficial, or first-degree, burn—is painful without being touched, but the redness and associated discomfort improve after a couple of days. A second-degree burn produces deeper damage of the skin and is always more painful. In addition to the discomfort, your skin will blister, and your burn will take longer to heal—usually two or three weeks. Second-degree burns occasionally leave a mild scar. A third-degree or “total-thickness burn” fries all the layers of your skin, and may land you in the hospital. Healing takes many weeks and always results in scarring.

One Phoenix-based dermatologist, Melvyn Alan Chase, MD, recommends staying out of the sun for a few days after sustaining a burn, and suggests non-prescription pain killers other than aspirin, which dilates blood vessels and can make your skin hurt more. He also

cautions against most over-the-counter treatments, but says that ointments or lotions containing local anesthetics such as benzocaine and other sensitizing agents are a good idea. "Keep in mind that non-prescription sunburn products, like cold creams and moisturizers, may reduce sunburn pain, but they don't speed healing. And please don't put butter or other gooey substances on the burn. They just plain don't help."

Chase instead recommends cold tap water, applied in a compress, for thirty minutes four times a day. And while he always recommends that we drink more water, he says dehydration in connection with sunburn isn't likely. "You'd have to burn a pretty large area to dry yourself out all that much."

Taken soon after sunburn, a prescription medicine called Indocin will help reduce pain, redness and swelling. And among non-prescription treatments, dermatologists most often mention Dermatique Cell Renewal Formula, a therapeutic skin care regimen that nourishes the process of skin renewal by feeding epidermal building blocks and restoring skin tone and moisture.

Some of the best remedies for sunburn can be found in your vegetable crisper, according to Tina Gooch, a self-professed "hippie healer" and former holistic medicine advisor who's written a book called *Kitchen Cures*. "A raw

potato is your best bet for healing sunburn," Gooch says. "Cut it in half and spread the sap over the sunburned area. It'll immediately cool your skin and relieve the pain. Or get your hands on some chamomile. Dilute the sap in warm water, and sponge it all over the burned area. That's your best bet."

Gooch is also a big fan of aloe vera as a sunburn soother. Straight aloe is best, she says, and can be purchased at most drug stores. Aloe-based burn balms are also effective, and can shorten the life of your burn and make it a less painful experience.

Whether your burns are first or third degree, sun damage is permanent and irreversible. And even if you manage to avoid sunburn altogether, extreme sun exposure and sunbathing produce gradual skin damage. At very least,

regular overexposure to the sun can age your skin prematurely, cause sagging, wrinkling, wart-like growths, and a leathery appearance. More frightening than ending up like an old handbag is the fact that this damage may not be immediately apparent: Ten to 40 years can pass between sun exposure and the time skin shows signs of sun damage.

"Nothing—not even the best tan in the world—is worth that kind of health risk," Chase says. "I tell my patients all the time: Forget about sunbathing. You might be a little pasty, but you'll live longer." ☞

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ASK THE EXPERT

Dr. Shannon Maltais

In recent decades, we've become more aware of how the sun can harm us.

That's because we're seeing more skin cancers. We know now that UVA rays are the ones that cause burning—very different thinking than we had before. The FDA is looking into whether certain sunscreens offer UVA protection.

But don't we need at least a little sun exposure?

Absolutely. But in order to create enough Vitamin D, the body needs no more than 15 minutes of sun each day—taken before 10 am or after 3pm, when the sun's rays are less harmful. But it's possible to get sufficient Vitamin D from food and supplements, and to stay out of the sun altogether.



How serious is a sunburn, then?

Once you're burned, the damage is irreversible. You've actually changed the makeup of your skin's DNA, as well as damaging the cellular membrane. More than three sunburns in a lifetime increases the risk of melanoma.

What about people with darker skin, though?

No one is spared from the DNA damage from sunburns. Darker people have more cells that create pigment, but darker individuals are likely to develop skin cancers, too. No one is free to just go out and tan.

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