What is a sunburn? — A sunburn happens when the skin gets burned from invisible light called ultraviolet (UV) light. UV light comes from the sun and can cause a sunburn when a person is in the sun for too long. People can also get a sunburn on a cloudy day, because UV light can go through clouds. Another way people can get a sunburn is from a tanning bed. Tanning beds use UV light to give people a tan.

Why should I avoid getting a sunburn? — It's important to avoid getting a sunburn, because people who get a lot of sunburns have a higher chance of getting certain other problems. These include:

- Skin cancer – There are different types of skin cancer. Most skin cancers can be treated easily. But sunburn increases the risk of getting a serious type of skin cancer, called "melanoma."
- Wrinkles and other skin changes that usually happen when people get older
- Eye problems called "cataracts" that can cause trouble seeing

What can increase my chance of getting a sunburn? — Your chance of getting a burn from the sun increases if you:

- Have pale skin and light-colored hair
- Are on a mountain or in a place that is closer to the sun
- Take certain medicines that can cause the skin to burn more easily

What are the symptoms of a sunburn? — Symptoms of a sunburn happen 3 to 5 hours after being in the sun and include:

- Redness ([picture 1]) – The redness is worst 12 to 24 hours after being in the sun and usually fades over 3 days.
- Pain
- Skin that feels hot when touched

In some cases, sunburns can be severe. Severe sunburns can cause:

- Blisters ([picture 2])
- Severe pain
- Swelling
- Fever

Can I treat a sunburn on my own? — You can treat a mild sunburn on your own by:

- Taking a pain-relieving medicine
- Applying cool compresses or soaks
Should I see a doctor or nurse? — You should call your doctor or nurse if you have a severe sunburn. Depending on your symptoms, he or she will tell you if you can treat your sunburn at home or if you need to see a doctor.

Can sunburns be prevented? — Yes. You can prevent sunburns by:

- Staying out of the sun in the middle of the day (from 10AM to 4PM), when the sun's light is strongest
- Staying under a sun umbrella, tree, or other shady spot
- Wearing sunscreen – Put sunscreen on all parts of the body that are not covered by clothes. Then reapply sunscreen every 2 to 3 hours, or after you sweat or swim. It's important to choose a sunscreen that:
  - Has an SPF of 30 or greater – SPF is a number that tells you how well a sunscreen protects the skin from UV light.
  - Protects against 2 types of UV light, called "UVA" and "UVB." (Sunscreens that offer both UVA and UVB protection are sometimes called "broad spectrum.")
  - Has not expired or is not more than 3 years old
- Wearing lip balm that has an SPF of 30 or greater
- Wearing sunglasses, a wide-brimmed hat, long-sleeved shirt, or long pants
- Not using tanning beds

More on this topic

Patient education: Skin cancer (non-melanoma) (The Basics)
Patient education: Melanoma skin cancer (The Basics)
Patient education: Skin burns (The Basics)

Patient education: Sunburn (Beyond the Basics)
Patient education: Sunburn prevention (Beyond the Basics)
Patient education: Skin burns (Beyond the Basics)

Patient education: Melanoma treatment; localized melanoma (Beyond the Basics)

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This person has a sunburn on the back. The skin that was not covered by clothes has turned red.

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Graphic 71537 Version 4.0
This child has a severe sunburn. The skin is red and swollen, and blisters have formed.


Graphic 52757 Version 4.0