

How to Be Safe When You're in the Sun

The weather is warming up, the days are longer and there's more time to be outside doing all kinds of fun things!

But if you're going to be out in the sun, especially on a hot day, you need to stay safe. Let's find out how.

Don't Feel the Burn

Even though the sun is hot, it does cool things. It keeps us warm. It makes flowers and plants grow. It even gives us vitamin D so we can better absorb calcium into our bodies for strong bones.

It does all these things by sending down light, which includes invisible **ultraviolet** (say: ul-trah-VYE-uh-lit) **rays**. These are also called **UV rays**. Some ultraviolet rays pass through air and clouds and penetrate the skin. When your skin's been exposed to too many of these rays, you get what's known as a sunburn. Ouch!

Some people get a sunburn faster than others because of their coloring. If you have blond or red hair, light-colored skin, and light-colored eyes, you'll tend to get a sunburn more quickly than someone with dark eyes and skin. That's because you have less **melanin** (say: MEL-uh-nun). Melanin is a chemical in the skin that protects it from sun damage by reflecting and absorbing UV rays. People with darker skin have more melanin, but even if you have dark hair, dark eyes, or darker-toned skin, you can still get a sunburn. It will just take a little bit longer.

Sunburns look bad and feel worse. They can cause blisters on your skin. They can keep you inside feeling sore when everyone else is outside having fun. They increase your chance of getting wrinkly when you get older. And worst of all, they can lead to skin cancer when you are an adult. Because getting wrinkles and getting sick don't happen right away, they can seem like things that could never happen to you. But you still need to be careful.

Prime Time

You don't need to hide from the sun completely or wrap up like a mummy to protect yourself. But you should take these two steps:

1. Always wear sunscreen.
2. Take frequent breaks from the sun by going indoors or moving into the shade.

These steps are especially important between **10:00 in the morning and 4:00 in the afternoon**, when the sun's rays are strongest.

Use a sunscreen with an SPF rating of 30 or higher. Put on sunscreen 15 to 20 minutes before going out in the sun. The letters SPF stand for sun protection factor, and the number rating tells you how much longer you can stay in the sun without getting sunburned.

But this isn't always true, so reapply sunscreen at least every 2 hours, just to be safe. Do this more often if you've been swimming or sweating a lot — even if the sunscreen is waterproof. And remember that you can get sunburned more quickly when you're swimming or boating because the reflection from the water intensifies the sun's rays.

Be sure to put sunscreen all over your body. This includes some places you might not think of, like the tops of your ears, the back of your neck, the part in your hair, your face, and the tops of your feet. You may need some help reaching the back of your body so ask your parents or friends to give you a hand. If you want to block the sun's rays, wear clothing that you can't see your hand through. You may still get burned through more sheer fabrics. Wear a baseball cap or other fun hat to block your face from the sun.

Don't forget that your eyes need protection from ultraviolet rays, too. Always wear sunglasses in the bright sun, and make sure they have a label saying that they block UV rays.

Drink Up!

Drinking water is an important part of staying healthy, especially when it's hot outside. When you're sweating, you lose water that your body needs to work properly. And if you're playing a sport or running around in the sun, you lose even more water, because you sweat that much more.

So drink up and don't wait until you're thirsty — drinking before you feel thirsty helps keep the water level in your body from dropping too low (dehydration) when it's hot or you're sweating a lot with exercise. If you forget and suddenly feel thirsty, start drinking then. There are lots of cool-looking water bottles around, so get one you really like, fill it up, and drink up!

Got That Hot Feeling?

If you're out in the hot sun or you're exercising on a hot day, it's easy to get **heat exhaustion**. Kids get heat exhaustion when their bodies can't cool themselves fast enough. A kid with heat exhaustion might feel overheated, tired, and weak.

Heat exhaustion can come on suddenly. A person may just collapse when playing soccer or tennis, for example. It can leave someone feeling really tired for days after it happens.

Heat stroke is a more serious heat-related illness and can cause someone to stop sweating; to have red, hot skin; and to have a high temperature. The person might become uncoordinated, confused, or even lose consciousness. It requires emergency medical attention.

Be sure to tell an adult if you're hot and you have a headache or feel dizzy or nauseated (like you're going to throw up). The grown-up will want to get you out of the sun, give you liquids to drink, and take you to a doctor, if necessary.

The good news is that the sun doesn't have to be your enemy if you wear your sunscreen, drink your water, and take breaks when you start to feel too hot. And don't forget your sunglasses. Not only do they protect your eyes from the sun, they make you look so cool!

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Note: All information on KidsHealth® is for educational purposes only. For specific medical advice, diagnoses, and treatment, consult your doctor.

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