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Why Your Skin Peels After a Sunburn, According to Dermatologists

Sarah Kinonen | 7/20/17

You skimped on sunscreen. Then forgot to re-apply. Now, you have a sunburn that — quite literally — burns like no other, and your scorched skin more resembles the scaly, flaky mess shed from reptiles (ew) than its usual smooth, glowing disposition. But did you know that when your skin begins to peel, it's actually your body's way of ridding itself of dead, damaged skin cells that were exposed to the sun's damaging ultra-violet rays? Pretty cool, if you ask us.



"UV light exposure causes free-radical damage to your skin," Joshua Zeichner, the director of cosmetic and clinical research in dermatology at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City, tells Allure. "Significant inflammation leads to a process known as programmed cell death, where skin cells shut down because they are too damaged to live properly. Any redness, and especially peeling, signifies that there has been damage to the skin."

In non-science speak, your body is literally shedding dead skin that was touched by the sun as a form of protection. So what does that mean for the skin that didn't shed? "In some cases, if skin cells do live despite significant damage to their DNA, they can become cancerous," says Zeichner.

That's why it's so (emphasis on so) important to slather on sunscreen (at least SPF 30) every day — 30 minutes before heading outdoors — and then re-apply every few hours, as the American Academy of Dermatology recommends. "Skin cancer is largely preventable," says Zeichner. "Even a single sunburn increases your risk of developing skin cancer later in life. This risk doubles if you develop a blistering burn." (Which is what unfortunately happened to this guy.)

Your best bet in skipping the scaling sensation, as well as avoiding your risk of skin cancer, entirely is to be sun smart. And don't get burnt. It's really as simple as it sounds. "It's like car accidents — don't put yourself in harms way and wear a seatbelt," Beverly Hills-based dermatologist **Ava Shamban** tells Allure. Along with slathering on SPF, Shamban recommends wearing a hat, sitting in the shade, and opting for UV-protected sunglasses when you're outdoors. "Taking precautions now will prevent premature aging, skin cancer, and painful peeling of unsightly skin," she says. "Treat your skin like your favorite article of clothing — you wear it every day."

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