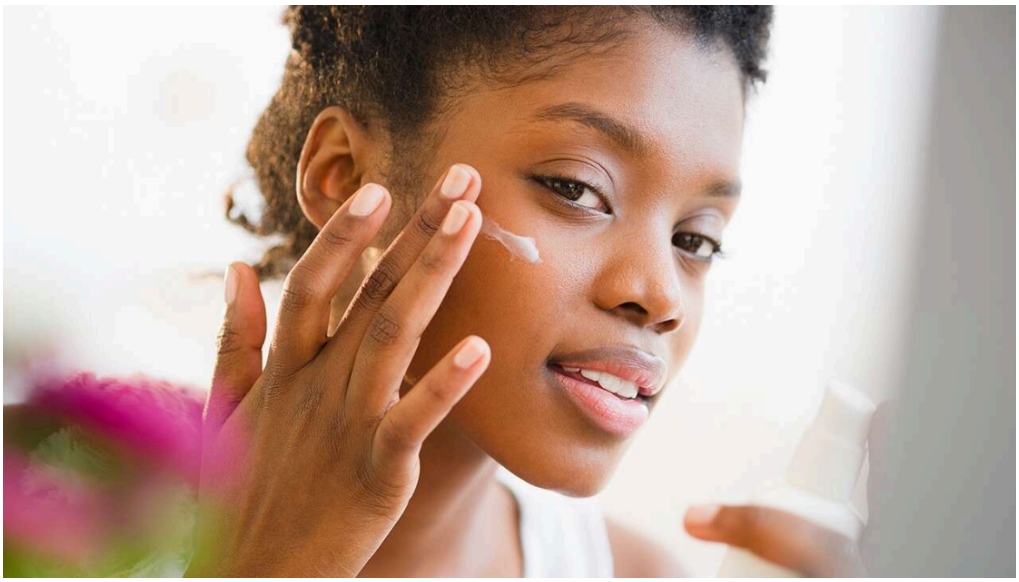
Everything You Need to Know About Sunscreen According to Experts -- Shop Our Editor's Picks!

By Amy Lee | June 21, 2019



Fact: you should apply sunscreen every day, rain or shine, especially on your face.

Aside from it preventing wrinkles, dark spots and burns, sunscreen decreases the serious risk of developing skin cancer.

But we admit, there's a lot of information out there about sunscreen and it can get confusing when we're looking at the bottles -- What does SPF stand for? What are UVA and UVB rays? And what the heck does broad spectrum really mean?

To help you find the right sunscreen and know exactly what you're buying, we've tapped a dermatologist and esthetician to tell us everything we need to know about the protective skincare product.

Read their expert tips ahead.

Difference Between UVA & UVB Rays

There are two types of UV rays: UVA and UVB. UVA rays cause long-term damage such as wrinkles and aging skin by breaking down collagen and elastin. UVB causes immediate damage such as sunburn (think A for aging and B for burn). UVB causes skin cancer faster than UVA. "UVA is present all day long: it is a photo-aging wavelength and can cause skin cancer, but not as efficiently as UVB, which peaks between the hours of 10 a.m. and 2 p.m.," Dr. Anna Guanche, a board-certified dermatologist and celebrity beauty expert, explains (Olivia Culpo is a patient)."[UVB] burns the skin more quickly and mutates cells more, thus causing skin cancer."

What Is SPF?

SPF stands for sun protection factor and the number after it indicates the ability of the sunscreen to protect your skin from UVB rays before it burns.

"[The number] is a multiplier times your own skin's sun defense," says Dr. Guanche.

For example, SPF 15 means it has 15 times as much protection as your natural skin's defense. In other words, if your skin burns in 10 minutes, an SPF 15 would prolong it to 150 minutes.

Physical vs. Chemical Sunscreen

There are two types of sunscreen: physical sunscreen and chemical sunscreen.

Physical (or mineral) sunscreen contains either zinc oxide or titanium dioxide.

"These minerals coat the skin, reflecting and refracting UV rays so they are not able to penetrate the skin or cause damage to the DNA of skin cells," Dr. Guanche shares.

"It is often referred to as a physical blocker," Rouleau adds. "Physical sunscreens protect from UVA and UVB rays and are naturally broad spectrum. Physical sunscreens also protect skin as soon as applied, no need to wait until it dries. Plus, they last longer when in direct UV light (but not when sweating or swimming) and they have a longer shelf life."

so reapplying is key. It can also often leave a white-ish cast on the surface.

Chemical sunscreen contains organic, carbon-based compounds, such as oxybenzone, octinoxate, octisalate and avobenzone, which creates a chemical reaction that absorbs and converts UV rays into heat and releases the heat from the skin.

It is usually less thick in texture than physical sunscreen, making it more "cosmetically elegant." "Generally, chemical sunscreens are what we call 'cosmetically elegant,' because they are less greasy, less white and shiny and less likely to block the pores, although newer micronized mineral formulas are cosmetically elegant as well," Dr. Gaunche says.

Rouleau points out two important things:

"[Chemical sunscreen] can actually cause an increase in brown spots and discoloration by increasing the skin's internal temperature. Also, the chemical ingredients oxybenzone and octinoxate have been banned in Hawaii for posing a risk of degrading coral reef when worn while swimming in the ocean. (This applies to water-resistant beach sunscreens only and not daily use sunscreens or makeup with sunscreen.)"

Dr. Gaunche also recommends avoiding PABA (para-aminobenzoic acid) in sunscreen.

Shop our recommended physical and chemical sunscreens ahead -- all broad spectrum.

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