

marie claire

Your ultimate guide to sun protection for dark skin

Jeanette Nkwate | February 19, 2024



(Image credit: Getty Images)

Finding the best sun cream and sun protection for dark skin can be a minefield. Do you go for a daily facial sunscreen or an SPF moisturiser? And then there's also the added factor (no pun intended) of whether or not you should be shopping for mineral or chemical sunscreens. And one of the most important things for a person of colour is finding a product that won't leave you with an ashy white cast.

I know from personal experience, as a person with melanated skin, that it can be difficult to know if you should be using sun protection (which by the way, yes, you should) and what type of sun protection you should be using. This is why for many people of colour, finding the best SPF for dark skin can be like finding the beauty holy grail. It certainly was the case for me, that was until I fell pregnant, had a baby and began breastfeeding, and I began to second guess my once beloved (and invisible) SPF's that were now apparently 'not safe' to use during this particular season in my life.

And so, my hunt for the best SPF for dark skin was reignited alongside my almost academic deep dive into the science. So read on for the ultimate guide to sun protection for dark skin with a rundown of the best sunscreens that I've personally tried and tested.

Do people of colour need sunscreen?

Yes, is the short answer to this question, everyone needs sun protection. "The sun is the great star at the centre of our solar system and also the number one most preventable cause of skin

ageing and pigmentation,” states Dr Brendan Khong, Medical & Aesthetic Doctor at the Dr David Jack Clinic. And the sun can do all this damage through ultraviolet rays, which are divided into UVA, UVB and UVC. UVC is blocked by the ozone layer, UVB is partially filtered by the atmosphere and clouds, and UVA can pass through glass. “Therefore, a good product should contain both UVB and UVA protection in order to provide optimal protection against UV rays,” explains Dr Rita Bonanno, Clinic Lead at Hair&Skin.

And regardless of skin colour, prolonged exposure to the sun’s UV rays can have harmful effects on the skin. “All skin types can suffer from sunburn, and some individuals can develop sun allergies or exacerbation of existing skin conditions, when exposed to the sun. So, that’s why regardless of skin colour, it’s important for everyone to wear sun protection,” says board-certified facial plastic and reconstructive surgeon, [Dr. Kimberly Lee](#). And as we mentioned before it’s also important for skin cancer prevention, and can deter premature ageing and hyperpigmentation. “I treat all skin types. The sun damage I see in clients’ skin often results from years of sun exposure since childhood, gradually appearing as solar (sun spots) or hormonal melasma patches. While freckles may look cute, they may indicate sun damage or melanin damage,” warns Joanne Evans, founder of Skin Matters.

Does melanin provide natural sun protection?

You may have heard the myth that people of colour don’t need sunscreen because darker skin tones have melanin or a ‘natural SPF’. But what exactly is melanin and how does it protect you? “Melanin is the dark pigment in the outer layer of skin which gives your skin its natural colour. When you’re exposed to UV light, your body protects itself by accelerating the production of melanin and the extra melanin results in the skin turning colour in the form of a tan.” explains Dr Ross Perry, Medical Director of Cosmedics skin clinics.

The amount of melanin an individual produces is generally down to genetics and someone with blonde hair and fair skin is likely to burn faster and easier than someone with darker skin. Which is probably why the myth that people of colour don’t need sunscreen was born.

The truth is the majority of us don’t produce enough melanin to protect the skin, which leads to the skin getting burnt and potentially leads to skin cancer. “Darker skin only gives you a SPF rating of seven. So, whilst it does take longer for darker skin tones to burn and less UV rays do penetrate our skin, we still can get skin cancer, melasma and hyperpigmentation from UV damage,” explains Dr Vanita Rattan, CEO and Cosmetic Formulator of SkincarebyDrV. And Nikki Hill, Founder and Board-Certified Dermatologist at Skin of Culture and Hair Center adds “I am an advocate that everyone should wear sunscreen every day. Even my patients of colour. I tell them, we don’t crack, but we do bend over time and that the sun is breaking down your collagen little by little every day.”

It’s also worth noting that many people tend to assume that skin cancer is more common with Caucasian skin, as the moles and dark lesions are more prevalent on lighter skin tones. But with skin of colour they just tend to be more camouflaged. “It is important to be vigilant of any changes in your skin that may indicate a more severe underlying problem, and seek help from a healthcare professional,” adds Dr Rattan.

Is chemical or mineral sunscreen better for dark skin?

If you have dark skin, you've probably asked yourself: should I pick a chemical or mineral sunscreen? But what on earth is the difference between the two types and which one won't leave you looking ashy? Let's start by defining the difference between mineral and chemical sunscreens, which are the two main types of sunscreens. Mineral/physical sunscreens, like zinc oxide and titanium dioxide, prevent or work as a barrier (hence their name) for the sun rays that are then reflected off of the skin. The main benefits of mineral sunscreens are that they are less likely to cause irritation and offer broad spectrum protection against UVA and UVB rays. It's typically recommended for more sensitive skin.

Meanwhile chemical sunscreens have active ingredients that absorb the UV rays, convert into heat and then release it through the skin. The benefits are that it's a little easier to apply, and they have a lighter texture to them. "Chemical sunscreens, with compounds like avobenzone or oxybenzone, are easier to apply but may sometimes cause skin irritation in some individuals," explains Dr Anjali Mahto, Consultant Dermatologist at Self London.

"A lot of people with darker skin tones are drawn to chemical sun creams because they don't use titanium dioxide or zinc oxide which, in some cases, leaves a white cast on the skin." adds Dr Dev Patel, founder skincare brand, CellDerma. But the good news is there are plenty of well-formulated sunscreens on the market now that don't leave a white cast.

How to find a pregnancy safe sunscreen suitable for dark skin

Pregnancy and breastfeeding are a huge change in a person's life (as I can attest), but it can also change your skincare needs. "Pregnant or breastfeeding individuals should be mindful of certain considerations when selecting sunscreen to ensure the safety of both themselves and their infants," explains Dr Mahto.

It's recommended to wear sunscreen with a minimum SPF of 30, which is labelled 'broad-spectrum' to protect against both UVA and UVB rays. Regular and liberal application of your sunscreen, along with other sun protection measures, remain crucial for skin health during pregnancy and breastfeeding as hormonal changes during pregnancy can make the skin more sensitive to the sun, "but it's important to check the ingredients and avoid retinoids and vitamin A derivatives," says Joanne.

One more consideration for anyone that's pregnant or breastfeeding is that "mineral sunscreens do not absorb into the skin or the bloodstream, as opposed to chemical sunscreens. This is why for pregnant mums-to-be, we would always recommend a mineral sunscreen over a chemical sunscreen. They are also hypoallergenic and non-comedogenic," explains Dr Rattan. But, Dr Banwell, the founder and former head of the Melanoma and Skin Cancer Unit (MASCUC) in East Grinstead, adds that "I would rather people wear any sunscreen than none at all". So remember to consult with a healthcare professional before using any skincare products during this time, this will ensure they align with your individual health conditions and medical advice.

<https://www.marieclaire.co.uk/beauty/skincare/sun-protection-for-dark-skin>