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The Bottom Line on Sunscreens - - Which Sunscreens are the Safest?

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The Environmental Working Group's 2011 sunscreen guide can help you determine which sunscreens are unsafe. The group recommends just 20 percent of the 600-plus sport sunscreens it evaluated.

For a product to score high marks, it needed to be free of potentially harmful chemicals. Not surprisingly, their list of products to avoid list contains some popular brands.

According to Yahoo News, companies with sunscreens that scored poorly include Aveeno, Banana Boat, CVS, and Neutrogena. For more information, and to see which products EWG approved, you can click on the Yahoo link below.



Time Magazine also recounts some of the Environmental Working Group's advice:

"Avoid oxybenzone and retinyl palmitate. Many effective products contain one or both compounds — oxybenzone and retinyl palmitate — that the EWG specifically suggests avoiding. Oxybenzone is an endocrine disrupter, the EWG says, and retinyl palmitate is a form of topical vitamin A that some animal studies suggest may be linked to an increased risk of skin cancer."

Sources:

- » [Yahoo Shine May 24, 2011](#)
- » [Time Magazine May 24, 2011](#)
- » [Environmental Working Group 2011 Sunscreen Guide](#)

Dr. Mercola's Comments:

If you go to your local drugstore and pick up a sunscreen for yourself and your family, there's a good chance that it will contain toxic chemicals that the Environmental Working Group's (EWG) 2011 Sunscreen Guide recommends completely avoiding.

This is true whether you choose a product with a high SPF or even for some of those that claim to be "natural." In fact, EWG recommends just 1 in 5 of more than 600 beach and sport sunscreens rated. Unfortunately, many Americans will be unknowingly bathing their bodies in toxic and ineffective sunscreen lotions when they head outdoors this summer -- but you don't have to be one of them.

Four Sunscreen "Red Flags"

[EWG's "Hall of Shame"](#) features sunscreen products that embody the worst of the worst when it comes to sun protection. You can spot these products by being aware of these four red flags:



1. Contains [Oxybenzone](#)

Sixty-five percent of non-mineral sunscreens on the U.S. market contain oxybenzone. This chemical penetrates your skin in large amounts, potentially triggering allergic reactions. Oxybenzone is also a potential endocrine-disrupting chemical that can cause hormone disruption and cell damage. It's been found that [97 percent of Americans](#) are contaminated with oxybenzone, and researchers have specifically advised against using this chemical on children, who are especially vulnerable to endocrine-disrupting chemicals. Writing in the journal the Lancet, researchers noted:

*"It would be **prudent not to apply oxybenzone to large surface areas of skin** for extended and repeated periods of time unless no alternative protection is available. There may be **an additional concern for young children** who have less well-developed processes of elimination and have a larger surface area per body weight than adults, with respect to systemic availability of a topically applied dose."*

2. Contains Vitamin A (Retinyl Palmitate)

The sunscreen industry uses vitamin A in its formulations because it is an anti-oxidant that is thought to slow skin aging. However, a U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) study found that a form of vitamin A, retinyl palmitate, when used in sunscreen and therefore exposed to sunlight may actually [speed the development of skin lesions and tumors](#).

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This conclusion came from EWG's analysis of the findings released by the FDA and the National Toxicology Program. As [EWG stated in the 2011 report](#):

"EWG analysis of product labels finds retinoid ingredients in hundreds of sunscreens, skin lotions, lip sticks and lip sunscreens—all of which pose safety concerns for sun-exposed skin. At this point, the NTP [National Toxicology Program] and FDA have invested more than a decade in studying retinoids, concluding in January 2011 that both retinyl palmitate and retinoic acid speed the development of cancerous lesions and tumors.

A year after EWG sounded the alarm about retinyl palmitate, there is still no FDA position on the safety of retinoids in cosmetics. Sunscreen industry trade groups continue to dispute EWG's warning. Most cosmetics companies have not removed these ingredients from sunscreens and other skin and lip products.

EWG recommends that consumers avoid products containing vitamin A, retinyl palmitate and retinol."

Our sunscreen used to have vitamin A in it, as at the time it was felt to be a benefit, but when we learned of its potential health problems we immediately removed it. However many other brands still include it in their formulas, so beware, and always check the labels when shopping for sunscreen.



3. Inadequate UVA Protection

The EWG analysis found that more than 60 percent of products reviewed provide inadequate UVA protection, and are actually so ineffective that they would not be approved in the European market. There are two primary types of UV rays from sunlight that you need to be concerned with, the vitamin-D-producing UVB rays and the skin-damaging UVA light.

Both UVA and UVB can cause tanning and burning, although UVB does so far more rapidly. UVA, however, penetrates your skin more deeply than UVB, and may be a much more important factor in photoaging, wrinkles and skin cancers.

Since UVA's are inherently more damaging AND persistently high during all daylight hours, wearing a sunscreen that doesn't protect you from UVA is going to give you virtually no benefit and be detrimental to your overall health. So it's important to understand that if you're using sunscreen, you need to be certain you are actually getting UVA protection.

Europe is taking a far more stringent stance to ensure that consumers are protected against the damaging UVA light when they use sunscreens, but in the United States sunscreen standards fall short.

As [EWG reported](#):

" ... Europe's proposed standards for UVA protection are far more stringent than FDA's. The agency has spent years finalizing a rule that would merely require disclosure of UVA protection levels, while Europe has proposed that sunscreens provide UVA protection at a level at least one-third as strong as the sunburn protection level (SPF).

This means the minimum UVA protection in Europe would be roughly equivalent to FDA's proposed three-star protection level. Requiring balanced protection across the UVB and UVA spectrum has the secondary effect of limiting sky-high SPF values, ensuring that sunburn protection isn't out of step with protection from other health problems, such as free radical damage and skin cancer.

Very few sunscreens on the U.S. market would meet the baseline UVA protection standards proposed in Europe."



4. Too High SPF or in Spray Form

Higher SPF sunscreens (SPF 50+) are not intrinsically harmful, however there's evidence that the higher protection level gives people a misleading sense of security, encouraging them to stay in the sun longer than they should. In reality, research suggests that people using high-SPF sunscreens get the same or similar exposure to ultraviolet (UV) rays as those using lower-SPF products.

Spray-on sunscreens (or powders) were advised against because potentially toxic particles are released into the air, making them easy to breathe in.

Which Sunscreens are the Safest?

After the analysis was complete, [EWG concluded](#):

"The best sunscreen is a hat and a shirt. No chemicals to absorb through the skin, no questions about whether they work."

I second this sentiment completely! I have long stated that one of the best strategies to protect yourself from the sun is actually not a sunscreen at all, it's wearing clothing or getting into the shade. This is precisely because, as EWG's findings support, most sunscreens are loaded with toxic chemicals that can actually accelerate skin cancer, or get into your bloodstream where they can disrupt your hormones.

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Also, the protection sunscreen manufacturers claim is often misleading.

Cotton clothing provides about SPF 15. In other words, you will get about 15 times your skin's normal protection from the sun wherever you cover your body with clothing. Just remember that even with protective clothing on your body, it's still important to monitor your skin for the telltale signs of burning.

However, safer sunscreen options do exist to provide safe protection from the sun during times when you may not be able to control the amount of sun exposure you are likely to receive with clothing. For instance, if you take your kids to an amusement park or the beach, you might just be in direct sunlight all day.

For times like these, choose a sunscreen that contains either zinc or titanium minerals -- the ingredient in all of [EWG's top-rated sunscreens](#). My research team has put together what we think is superior sun protection and you can [find more about it here \(http://products.mercola.com/summer-survival-kit/\)](http://products.mercola.com/summer-survival-kit/).

Other safe sunscreen ingredients that will nourish your skin include:

Coconut oil	Joboba oil
Sunflower oil	Shea butter
Vitamins D and E	Eucalyptus oil



Why You Should NOT Wear Sunscreen Every Time You're Outdoors

Getting safe sun exposure every day is actually one of the best things you can do for your health, because sun exposure allows your body to naturally produce your own supply of vitamin D.

Why is [vitamin D](#) so important?

If you've spent any time on my site at all, you know that I'm a firm advocate for optimizing your vitamin D levels because it impacts so many aspects of health. For example, this superb nutrient is known to help:

Support your cardiovascular health	Support healthy kidney function
Enhance your muscle strength	Promote healthy teeth

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Help produce optimal blood pressure levels	Help keep your bones strong and healthy
Help maintain a healthy immune system	Reduce the risk of cancer

This list of important benefits represents only a *fraction* of the many ways vitamin D helps optimize your health. And, although you can obtain vitamin D from natural food sources or supplements, experts agree on one thing: Sunlight is by far the best way to get your vitamin D. The so-called experts who advise you to avoid all sunlight and religiously apply sunscreen are actually encouraging you to increase your risk of cancer, not lower it...

Over the years, several studies have already confirmed that appropriate sun exposure may even help prevent skin cancer. In fact, melanoma occurrence has been found to decrease [with greater sun exposure](#), and can be increased by sunscreens.

The key is to find a healthy balance between getting enough natural sunlight to maximize your vitamin D production and maintain your optimal health, while at the same time protecting yourself from damage that occurs from overexposure to the sun. The point to remember is that once your skin turns the lightest shade of pink (if you're Caucasian), it's time to get out of the sun. Past this point of exposure your body will not produce any more vitamin D and you'll begin to have sun damage. And sunburn anywhere on your body is not good for your health.



What You Need to Know for a Sun-Safe Summer

If you work outdoors all day as part of your job, or if you need to protect sensitive areas of your face, like around your eyes, that are particularly susceptible to photoaging and not large enough a surface to impact vitamin D levels if blocked with sunscreen, certain sunscreens available in most health food stores, and [the my Healthy Skin Sunscreen](#), are safe to use when the need arises.

You can also see exactly how your sunscreen rates for safe ingredients and efficacy by checking out [EWG's 2011 Sunscreen Guide](#).

However, sometimes even the most vigilant of us forget to bring along the proper natural sunscreen when we need it, which is why it's wise to ensure your body is primed to have the best defense against overexposure to the sun's harmful UVA rays at all times.

[Consuming a healthy diet](#) full of natural antioxidants has always been a useful strategy in this regard, and fresh, raw, unprocessed foods deliver the nutrients that your body needs to maintain a healthy balance of omega-6 and omega-3 oils in your skin, which is your first line of defense against sunburn.

Fresh, raw vegetables also provide your body with an abundance of powerful anti-oxidants that will help you fight the free radicals caused by sun damage that can lead to burns and cancer.

The relatively unknown carotenoid called [astaxanthin](#) has also piqued the interest of researchers due to its ability to reduce signs of aging by helping protect your skin from sun damage.

Astaxanthin is produced from marine algae in response to exposure to UV light. This is the way the algae protects itself, so it makes perfect sense that this deeply pigmented substance would have the capacity to "shield" you when it is taken in large enough quantities for a long enough time to saturate your body's tissues. Typically this is several weeks.

[Cyanotech Corporation funded a study](#) through an independent consumer research laboratory to measure the skin's resistance to both UVA and UVB light, before and after astaxanthin supplementation.

The result was that in only three weeks of taking 4mg per day subjects showed a significant increase in the amount of time necessary for UV radiation to redden their skin.

