Do cosmetics containing sunscreen provide adequate sun protection? [1]

Dear Alice,

I was thinking of buying a face powder that says it has an spf of 30. It seems convenient to have a powder sunblock since lotions make my oily face greasy. However, I was wondering if this powder will even be effective as a sunblock since I heard that some moisturizers and other products that advertise an added SPF sometimes don't have a high enough concentration of sunblocking ingredients to make it effective. I would like to know what do you think before I make my purchase. Thanx.

Answer

Dear Reader,

More and more cosmetics nowadays contain sunscreens with a range of sun protection factors (SPFs). Sunscreens can now be found in some face powders, foundations, lipsticks, and specially formulated face moisturizers. Some of these moisturizers are oil-free and use non-greasy sunscreen ingredients that may not produce an oil slick on your face.

Whether you get your sunscreen from makeup products; sunscreen-only lotions, creams, gels, sprays, wax sticks, or ointments; or both, the American Cancer Society (ACS) [2] recommends at least SPF-15 for anyone, regardless of skin color, who spends any time in the sun. The face powder with an SPF-30 that you mention in your question would be an effective sunscreen (not a sun block), but you may not want to use it alone as it does not provide complete sun protection. Instead, you can apply a light face lotion that offers broad-spectrum sun protection against both UVA and UVB rays underneath the face powder, which can help minimize a shiny finish to your face. For more shelter from the sun, remember to reapply frequently and to wear a broad-rimmed hat to block out some of the sun's rays.

Regarding some of the moisturizers and other products that you refer to, tanning oils, in particular, often have less than SPF-2, which would provide inadequate sun protection. Your question points out the confusion consumers have faced when evaluating and buying sunscreen products. The good news is that in 2011 the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) updated sunscreen labeling regulations to help consumers make better choices when sunscreen shopping. These regulations also apply to cosmetics and moisturizers labeled with SPF values. Manufacturers must:
- Remove misleading or unproven claims, such as "sun block," "waterproof," and "all-day protection."
- Indicate whether the sunscreen remains effective for 40 minutes or 80 minutes while swimming or sweating, based on standard testing. If not water resistant, labels must instruct consumers to use a water resistant sunscreen if swimming or sweating.
- List ingredients and standard "Drug Facts" information on the back and/or side of the container.
- Include a warning label on tanning products that don’t have sunscreen.
- Limit the maximum SPF value on sunscreen labels to "50 +" because there is not sufficient data to show that products with SPF values higher than 50 provide greater protection for users than products with SPF values of 50.
- Limit using the claim that sunscreen reduces the risk of skin cancer and early skin aging if used as directed to Broad Spectrum sunscreens with an SPF value of 15 or higher.
- State that Non-Broad Spectrum sunscreens and Broad Spectrum sunscreens with an SPF value between 2 and 14 only help prevent sunburn.

Take care out there,

Alice!
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