Sunburn cures? [1]

Hi Alice,

I was in the sun for seven hours yesterday and I got a pretty bad sunburn. My face has blisters all over it. The redness is severe, and the pain is severe. Any suggestions that you may have will help. To top it off, I am a diabetic and am worried about infection of the blisters. Thanks.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Ouch! Your burn does sound pretty severe. Intense redness, pain, and especially blistering indicate that you likely need to have your skin looked at by a health care provider. If you experience chills, a fever, nausea, or disorientation, seek medical help immediately. Moreover, as someone with diabetes [2], your concerns are warranted—folks living with this condition are at a higher risk of infections. But, that’s not the only concern for diabetics (more on that in a bit). That said, there are some at-home methods to help reduce your current discomfort and a few strategies you can employ to prevent sunburn in the future.

Right now, there are a few recommendations you might consider to help you get to feeling a little less uncomfortable. These include:

- Avoid additional sun exposure as you heal.
- Stay hydrated by drinking plenty of water.
- Use moisturizer or aloe vera on your skin.
- Apply a cool, wet compress or take a cool bath.
- Take an over-the-counter (OTC) anti-inflammatory medication, such as ibuprofen.
- Make sure the blisters you have stay clean, but unbroken (don’t pop them). If any blisters do pop, make sure to wash them gently with mild soap and water. Apply antibacterial ointment to the affected areas and cover with gauze if needed.

Adapted from Mayo Clinic [3].
Though you may be feeling pretty lousy right now, it’s advised that you avoid using any OTC sprays or medication for sunburn relief that contain ingredients ending in -caine? (e.g., benzocaine). The use of these products may actually further irritate the skin or result in allergic reactions for some folks. And, as your skin heals and peels, remove the peeling skin gently and keep your skin moisturized.

While infection is a concern for anyone who experiences blisters caused by a sunburn, this is especially a concern for diabetics. According to the American Diabetes Association[4], people living with this condition are more prone to infections most commonly caused by bacteria or fungus. In order to prevent this, use moisturizer regularly and keep your skin clean and dry at all times. If you notice any signs of infection (e.g., increase in pain or swelling, yellow-ish drainage (pus) from a blister, or red streaks leading around a blister), or if you don’t feel that the sunburn is improving, seek medical attention as soon as possible. But, that isn’t the only concern folks with diabetes may have when dealing with sunburn. It’s been noted that extended exposure to heat and pain, such as the type associated with sunburn, can increase hormone levels that raise blood glucose levels for diabetics. Because of this, make sure to keep your glucose levels in control by following the treatment plan you’ve developed with your health care provider.

Lastly, it’s good to mention that over-exposure to the sun also increases your chances of premature aging of the skin and developing malignant melanoma the least common, but most lethal form of skin cancer. Moving forward, consider what precautions you can take to limit your exposure before heading out for another day in the sun. Some recommended strategies include using sunscreen regularly (SPF 30 or more is advised) and wearing clothing and protective gear (e.g., long sleeves, hats, sunglasses)[5] to cover your skin and avoid sunburns in the future.

Here’s hoping your skin recovers quickly and without complication.

Alice!

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