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Be Smart About Sunscreen

Memorial Day means the official start of beach-and-barbeque season. As the temps climb higher and many of us start spending more time outdoors, it's more important than ever to protect our skin with sunscreen. But let's face it: Standing in front of the sunscreen display at your local drugstore can be overwhelming. With seemingly zillions of different brands, formulas, ingredients, and SPF levels to choose from, I asked [Jordana S. Gilman, M.D.](#), a Manhattan-based dermatologist, to share her expert opinion about what to look for in a sunscreen. Here's her advice:

Q: I generally prefer products that use physical sun blockers like titanium dioxide and zinc oxide. But do these offer the same broad-spectrum coverage that chemical ingredients like avobenzone do?

A: "Zinc oxide and titanium dioxide are broad-spectrum sunscreens and offer protection from UVA and UVB [rays]. The physical blockers are less likely to be irritating to sensitive skin than the chemical blockers."

Q: I'm seeing lots of super-high SPF products—50, 70, even 100+—on the market now. What's the minimum SPF level I should use? And should I go for the highest level of protection available?

A: "You should look for a sunscreen with an SPF of at least 30, but use the highest you can find, especially if you know you are going to be getting sun exposure. With higher numbered SPF the increased protection you get against UV [rays] is very small. However, most people don't put on as much sunscreen as they should, so they probably aren't reaching the level of SPF that is on the label. (They're putting on too little so it's too sheer on their skin, and what is labeled a 30 is effectively only a 15 because they've skimped on the application). That's why we recommend that people use the highest SPF that they can find, apply generously, and reapply often."

Q: Should I look for a sunscreen that also contains antioxidants?

A: "Yes! Antioxidants inactivate free radicals (which are in ultraviolet light and environmental pollution) that cause damage to the skin that not only leads to premature aging but also promotes skin cancer."

Q: I like using sunscreen wipes—especially for my child. But are these truly effective?

A: "These wipes may contain effective sunscreen ingredients, but you probably aren't getting enough onto your skin to rely on wipes as your sole sunscreen. It may be best to use these for touch-ups during the day or to keep in your bag for a sun emergency."

Q: I've read about oral supplements that can act as sunscreens. What are these, and are they effective?

A: "Scientists are looking at ways to use oral supplements to boost the body's natural protective mechanisms against free radicals and ultraviolet light. These are not sunscreens per se, they're really antioxidants that replenish or restore the skin's natural stores of antioxidants, which get depleted after exposure to sunlight. The theory is that these could potentially work in combination with conventional sunscreen to provide more effective protection against UV [rays] and free radicals; less redness and less DNA damage in the short term means less skin cancer and less wrinkles and signs of aging in the long run. But, these should not ever be thought of as replacing regular sunscreen, and at this point I wouldn't recommend that people take these pills. Properly applied sunscreen, sunglasses, hats, and even sun protective clothing are effective methods of reducing UV exposure, skin cancer risk, and premature aging. For my antioxidants, I rely on a healthy diet and an antioxidant serum."

Q: Finally, there are so many different products on the shelves that frankly, I'm confused as to what's the best product to buy. What are your recommendations?

A: "Start by picking a sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher labeled "broad spectrum protection" or that says it blocks both UVA and UVB [rays]. The specific ingredients only matter if you have an allergy to sunscreen or if you have sensitive skin, in which case you should look for the physical blockers zinc oxide or titanium dioxide. There are different formulations for convenience. It's best to start with a cream, lotion, gel, or spray that you can be confident you have applied adequately. Then, you can reapply using whatever formula is convenient for where you are, what you're doing, and the part of your body you are covering—provided you are reapplying generously!" —*Erika Rasmusson Janes*

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