

## Eczema and the sun factsheet

Everyone with eczema is affected by heat. People with eczema need to protect their skin from the sun and find a sunscreen that does not irritate their skin.

Some people find that their eczema improves with exposure to sunlight (this is particularly true of contact dermatitis and discoid eczema), while others experience a worsening of their condition.

In rare cases, eczema is directly caused by exposure to ultraviolet light (sunlight). The term for this is 'photosensitive eczema'.

Certain drugs, chemicals and even plants can cause the skin to become sensitive to sunlight. If you develop eczema or your eczema becomes a lot worse after sun exposure, check with a healthcare professional to see if this could be due to your medication or some other cause.

Everyone should protect their skin from the sun all year round. The sun's rays can still penetrate in winter, but in the UK they are more harmful between March and October.

Protect your skin too when you are enjoying winter sports such as skiing, since the sun's rays at high altitude and reflecting off snow can be very strong. Remember that the closer you are to the equator, the higher the UV radiation levels, so it is easy to burn even when there is cloud cover.

### General advice on sun protection

Cancer Research UK and the British Association of Dermatologists' patient hub are sources of up-to-date information on sun protection:

- [www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/causes-of-cancer/sun-uv-and-cancer](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/causes-of-cancer/sun-uv-and-cancer)
- [www.skinhealthinfo.org.uk/sun-awareness](http://www.skinhealthinfo.org.uk/sun-awareness)

Here are some general sun protection tips from the British Association of Dermatologists for the summer or a sunny holiday:

- Protect the skin with clothing, including a hat, t-shirt and sunglasses.
- Spend time in the shade between 11am and 3pm when it is sunny. Keep babies and young children out of direct sunlight.
- Use a 'high protection' sunscreen of at least SPF30, which also has high UVA protection (4 or 5 UVA stars), and make sure you apply it generously and frequently when in the sun.

Sunscreens that offer both UVA and UVB protection are ideal – these are sometimes labelled 'broad spectrum' sunscreens.

Sunscreen can be removed unintentionally by sweating, swimming or drying with a towel. This is why regular application is recommended with **all** sunscreens, including those marketed as only needing to be applied once a day. Check expiry dates, as efficacy reduces in older products. According to the British Association of Dermatologists, the typical shelf life for a sunscreen is 30 months.

### Protecting skin with sunscreen

People with eczema and sensitive skin can react to all sorts of things, and finding a suitable sunscreen is a matter of trial and error. When choosing a sunscreen, you need to consider the same things that you would consider when choosing an emollient. For example, it is recommended that you avoid fragrance ingredients. The

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Cosmetic, Toiletry and Perfumery Association's consumer website ([www.thefactsabout.co.uk](http://www.thefactsabout.co.uk)) contains lists of ingredients commonly associated with sensitisation (becoming sensitive to an allergen). These can be found in its section, 'Will I get an allergy from cosmetics?'

Ingredients labels on products will help you avoid substances to which you have a known sensitivity, but you should test any new sunscreen before applying it liberally. You can do this by applying a small amount of the product to an area of the inner forearm once a day for 3-5 days, and assess whether it has irritated your skin, before applying it to the whole body. It is also recommended that you test sunscreens that you have used in the past, since the formulation – or your skin – may have changed.

There are two main types of sunscreen:

- 1. Chemical absorbers, which absorb UV radiation.**
- 2. Mineral-based reflectors (containing mineral-based active ingredients, such as titanium dioxide and zinc oxide), which reflect UV radiation.**

Some sunscreens use a combination of mineral (also described as 'physical') and chemical filters to ward off UV damage in different ways.

Many people with eczema seem to find mineral-based reflector sunscreens less irritating to their skin than chemical absorbers.

Traditional mineral-based sunscreens tend to leave a white sheen on the skin, which can be off-putting, particularly for people with a darker skin tone. Newer formulations are less likely to have this effect.

As with all products used on the skin, what works for one person with eczema will not necessarily work for another.

### Emollients and sunscreen

Sun exposure is drying to the skin. Try to apply your emollient about half an hour before applying sunscreen. This gap will help ensure the sunscreen remains undiluted and keeps its protective properties.

If you are using an emollient that is greasy or oily, be careful not to overdo application as this can cause a 'frying' effect in the sun.

### Practical advice and tips

- To maximise its quality, store sunscreen in a cool, dry place away from direct sunlight or, if on holiday, keep it in the shade.
- Apply sunscreen generously for greater effectiveness – most people apply too little. Apply all over sun-exposed areas (the back and sides of the neck, temples and ears are commonly missed areas).
- Remember to re-apply sunscreen every 2 hours during the day and after sweating, swimming and towel-drying.
- Avoid rubbing in sunscreen, as this may trigger itchiness. Apply it in smooth, downward strokes, as you would apply an emollient.
- Sunscreens come in a variety of formulations: creams, lotions, gels, sticks and sprays. As with emollients, choose the one that suits you the best and does not irritate your skin. Sprays are particularly useful for children.
- No sunscreen provides 100% protection, so wear protective clothing, a hat and sunglasses as well as applying sunscreen every 2 hours.
- Babies and young children should wear sun protective clothing with a built-in SPF50. This clothing is also available for adults who are sensitive to sunscreen.
- Carry out a sunscreen self-patch test for 3-5 days before you go on holiday.
- Leave a gap of around 30 minutes between applying an emollient and a sunscreen (apply emollient first). Without the application of sunscreen, emollient can cause a 'frying effect', which can include harmful burning.

### Sunscreen product suggestions

Here are some examples of unfragranced, mineral-based sunscreens, which seem to suit many people with eczema. This is not an exhaustive list:

- Heliocare Mineral Tolerance Fluid SPF50
- Isdin Fotoprotector Pediatrics Fusion Fluid Mineral Baby SPF50
- SunSense Sensitive SPF50+

Here are some examples of unfragranced sunscreens that are not mineral-based (they use a combination of mineral and chemical filters), but which followers of our social media platforms and others in the eczema community have found suitable for them:

- Altruist SPF30, SPF50
- La Roche-Posay Anthelios Dermo-Pediatrics Lotion SPF50+
- Uvistat SPF30, SPF50

We do not recommend any one sunscreen, as what suits one person will not necessarily suit another.

#### DISCLAIMER

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