

Toxic Sunscreens?

The label only tells part of the story

As the weather gets more wonderful, we are advised to slather on the sunscreen. But have you been slopping on sunscreen and still getting burned? Does your sunscreen do more harm than good?

The bad news: Not all sunscreens work, or they contain chemicals that may be harmful.

America's skin cancer rate is one million a year and rising among young white women. Yet the FDA has still not finalized sunscreen standards first announced 30 years ago.

Environmental Working Group (EWG), a nonprofit advocacy organization, evaluated 952 sunscreen products and found that four out of five either contain possibly hazardous chemicals or don't provide adequate protection. None of market leader Coppertone's 39 sunscreen products met EWG's criteria for safety and effectiveness, and only one of 89 products from Banana Boat and Neutrogena, the second- and third-largest manufacturers, are recommended by EWG. Search for "sunscreens" at www.cosmeticsdatabase.com for more information.

EWG assessed both UVA and UVB protection, how fast ingredients break down in sun and the known and suspected hazards of listed ingredients. For example, oxybenzone, widely used, is absorbed through the skin, has a high rate of allergic reactions and raises concerns about hormone disruption.

I was working in consumer protection for the New York attorney general when I first learned, years ago, that sunscreen ingredients then in use were ineffective, and only Padimate O offered real protection. My wife and I searched out Padimate O sunscreens and used them for years, thinking we were protecting ourselves and our children.

It now turns out Padimate O "releases free radicals, damages DNA, has estrogenic activity, and causes allergic reactions in some people," according to EWG.

The good news is that there are effective sunscreens with safe ingredients – but they're pricey, and they don't exactly clutter the shelves of local stores. EWG lists 139 products that offer "very good" protection, remain stable in sunlight and pose few if any known or suspected hazards.

There are silver linings here – well, zinc and titanium oxide linings. Studies show little to no zinc and titanium absorb through the skin, and they provide stable UVA protection relative to the other ingredients. A caveat: In spray or powder sunscreens, inhalation of particles is a concern.

So far, I've found the safest and most effective brands are both pricey and hard to come by. I couldn't find many brands top-rated by EWG at several local stores. Last time I looked, Sundance and Kiva had one of the best – Badger SPF 30 – cheaper than the company charges online. Market of Choice also had Badger, but only SPF 15.

For effective and safe protection, look for a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 30, and at least 7 percent zinc oxide or titanium oxide. Slop on early, liberally and often. Wear a hat, UV sunglasses and a shirt. And minimize exposure between 10 am and 4 pm.

On the other hand, 10-15 minutes of unprotected exposure a day empowers your body to produce vitamin D, linked in separate studies to protection against several forms of cancer. Details were published in *Environmental Nutrition*, and you can search for "vitamin D cancer" at www.environmentalnutrition.com but you have to either take a 30-day free trial or subscribe for access.

Robert Roth is a retired lawyer who worked for 25 years in consumer frauds and protection for the attorneys general of Oregon and New York.



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