

Sun and Eczema

Everyone with eczema is affected by the sun – some people may find their eczema improves, but for others the sun can be an irritant, and is described as photo sensitive eczema. Sometimes the sun can react with chemicals, plants, or medication causing a photoallergic dermatitis. If eczema symptoms worsen in the sun, this may be a rare type of photo aggravated eczema. Generally, heat from the sun can make the skin drier and aggravate eczema symptoms.

It is important that people with eczema protect their skin from the sun with sunscreen, sun protective clothing and seek the shade. Selecting a suitable sunscreen can be challenging and may require some trial and error to find the sunscreen that suits and does not irritate their skin. Sunscreens selected should be fragrance-free and mineral based sunscreens are often better tolerated but this does depend on the individual. Sunscreen should be applied after emollient with a 30-minute gap in between application.

Protecting your skin from the sun

Some people find their eczema improves with exposure to the sun. This is why phototherapy; a UV light treatment is used in eczema. However, some people experience a worsening of eczema when exposed to the sun – this is called photosensitivity and an irritant reaction. In rare cases, eczema is directly caused by exposure to ultraviolet light (sunlight). The term for this is photo-aggravated eczema.

Certain drugs, chemicals and even plants together with sun exposure can cause an eczematous reaction. If you develop eczema in the sun or your eczema gets worse in sunlight after sun exposure, check with a healthcare professional to see if this could be due to your medication or some other cause. This type of eczema caused by a reaction to the sun is called photoallergic dermatitis.

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/aboutcancer/causes-of-cancer/sun-uv-and-cancer
- 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 broad spectrum protection sunscreen of at least SPF 30, (ideally SPF 50 for children) with UVA protection – UK brands use stars, ensure 4-5 stars, or European makes have UVA protection stamped on container.
- Make sure you apply sunscreen generously and regularly when in the sun – every 2 hours and after swimming, sweating and towel drying.

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.

No sunscreen gives 100% protection; it is an additional and not a substitute for shade and clothing. Check expiry dates, as older products lose effectiveness. All sunscreens have an open jar label, and usually expire 12 months after opening, so buy new sun screen every year.

Protecting skin with sunscreen

People with eczema and sun sensitive skin need to find a suitable sunscreen, which can be a matter of trial and error. If you have skin of colour, it is important to use sunscreen as sunlight can be an irritant for anyone with eczema, and sun will increase pigmentation in your skin, and burning can result in skin cancer for anyone. Many sunscreens are now tinted and more suitable for darker skin.

Look at the ingredient label on the sunscreen, if you have a contact dermatitis you can check the product does not contain your allergen, or any substances to which you have a known sensitivity. 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:

- Chemical absorbers, which absorb UV radiation.
- 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, and more sunscreens are now tinted.

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.
 - Remember heat is a common trigger for eczema and sweating causes irritation with together with hot weather can flare eczema.
 - UV exposure and sun cause more skin dryness, so emollient use may need to be increased but use creams or gels as ointments may cause discomfort in the heat as sweat pores become blocked with greasy emollients.

Sunscreen product suggestions

Here are some examples of unfragranced mineral and chemical sunscreens which may be suitable of people with eczema.

We do not recommend any one sunscreen as what suits one person may not necessarily suit another. Please note this is not an exhaustive list.

Mineral sunscreens

- Heliocare Mineral tolerance fluid SPF 50
- Moo Goo natural sunscreen SPF 40
- Ultra sun mineral baby SPF 50
- Boots SPF 30 mineral body lotion
- Soltan Clear and cool mist SPF 50
- Avene very high protection mineral fluid SPF 50

Chemical sunscreens

- Alturist cream and spray, SPF 30 and 50
- La Poche Posay Anthelios* (white and tinted) SPF 50
- Uvistat* SPF30 and 50
- Soltan sensitive and sun allergy lotion SPF 30
- Eucerin allergy protect sunscreen gel SPF 50

*Both these sunscreens can be prescribed on the NHS for patients with photo-aggravated eczema

Disclaimer

Our publications contain information and general advice about eczema. They are written and reviewed by dermatology experts, with input from people with eczema.

We hope you find the information helpful, although it should not be relied upon as a substitute for personalised advice from a qualified healthcare professional. While we strive to ensure the information is accurate and up-to-date, Eczema UK does not accept any liability arising from its use.

We welcome reader feedback on our publications, please email us at info@eczema.org

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