



NEWS

New sunscreen labels: How to read the fine print

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Story Highlights

Sunscreen labels must follow new FDA rules

Claims must be backed by testing

Sunscreen alone won't save your skin

At first glance, the sunscreen bottles, tubes and canisters on store shelves this spring may not look much different from what consumers have seen in the past.

But look closer. Gone are misleading terms such as "waterproof" and "sunblock." Added are warnings that some products don't protect against wrinkles and skin cancer and that others do so only as part of a larger sun-protection plan.

These changes and others are the result of new labeling rules from the Food and Drug Administration. The long-delayed rules cover all sunscreen products shipped by large manufacturers since mid-December.

Although consumers may still spot some old products, shipped before the deadline, most of the 4,500 or so relabeled products should be on shelves now or very soon, says Farah Ahmed, who represents sunscreen makers for the Personal Care Products Council. The switch is a huge undertaking, she says, because it includes not only beach and sport products, but every makeup, moisturizer or lip balm that carries an SPF (sun protection factor) number.

But will the new labels help consumers better protect their skin from sun damage?

They will, skin health experts say — if consumers take the time to read the fine print and then choose and use the products wisely.

Here's what you need to know:

- **SPF numbers still matter.** This is the number that tells you how well a product protects you from sunburn, caused by ultraviolet B (UVB) rays. The numbers range from 2 to 100 or more. For a good margin of safety, choose products with SPFs of at least 30 to 50, says Henry Lim, chief of dermatology at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit. Keep in mind that you get the promised protection only if you apply the product liberally and often (at least every two hours).
- **Low SPFs now come with a warning.** Products with SPFs below 15 must carry warnings that they protect only against sunburn, not skin aging or skin cancer. Such products, often sold as "tanning lotions," are not recommended by dermatologists but "there's definitely a market of people in sun-tanning denial who are still using them," says Ellen Marmur, a New York City dermatologist and spokeswoman for the American Academy of Dermatology.
- **Broad spectrum claims are backed by testing.** Dermatologists have long recommended broad spectrum sunscreens, those that offer significant protection from both UVB and UVA rays. Both kinds of rays contribute to wrinkles and skin cancer. Now products must pass a standard test before they make that claim.
- **Water-resistant does not mean waterproof.** Labels can no longer say that sunscreens are waterproof or sweat-proof, because all of them wash or wear off. The new labels can claim water resistance, but must tell consumers how often to reapply the product when swimming or sweating — every 40 minutes or every 80 minutes. Those claims also must be backed by testing.
- **Sunscreen is never enough.** Broad spectrum sunscreens with SPFs of 15 and above now carry labels that say they "can reduce the risk of skin cancer and early skin aging" if used as directed — in combination with limiting your time in the sun, especially at midday, and wearing long sleeves, pants, hats and sunglasses.

Those additional measures are probably more important than any sunscreen, says Sonya Lunder, a senior analyst with the Environmental Working Group. The watchdog group, which will update annual sunscreen recommendations in May, has been critical of what it says are hyped sunscreen claims and unproven safety. It also wants FDA to approve sunscreen ingredients available elsewhere in the world that it says are more effective.

The FDA, the industry and many dermatologists, including Lim and Marmur, say the products on the market are safe and effective but that the advice not to rely on sunscreen alone is important.

"Sun protection is a total package," and includes shade, broad-brimmed hats and "common sense," Lim says.

"We're not anti-sun," Marmur says. "You can go out there and have fun. But there are ways to make it safer."