

SKIN — APR 25, 2023

I Realized I Knew Nothing About Sunscreen, so I Got Dermatologists to School Me

by SARAH YANG

I've been slightly fixated on learning about skincare and doing all I can to ensure my skin is the healthiest it can be since I turned 30. But it's not all about [anti-aging](#) or [fending off wrinkles](#). In fact, turning the big 3-0 made me rethink my overall health. Now that I'm about five months into my 31st year, I feel like I've made some progress on this goal. I've been stepping outside of my fitness comfort zone (aka indoor cycling and barre) and [trying new workouts](#). I've made it a priority to [eat better](#) while also allowing for some fun now and then. I've been taking more care of and paying better attention to my [mental health](#). And I've been taking in all the [skincare knowledge](#) I can.

However, I realized I knew only the bare minimum about [sunscreen](#), particularly body sunscreen. Sure, I knew it was a vital skincare product (and luckily, one you can buy at the [drugstore](#). I applied it diligently every day. When at the beach or by the pool, I would reapply every few hours. But I knew nothing about the differences in sunscreen types, the ingredients, or what SPF levels *really* meant.

So I reached out to two dermatologists to get some answers. Here's a very general breakdown:

Chemical vs. Mineral





PHOTO: @TAMARAMORY

Heather D. Rogers, MD, founder and CEO of [Doctor Rogers Restore](#) and co-founder of [Modern Dermatology](#) in Seattle, says that when talking about sunscreens, there are two types: chemical and mineral protection. Rogers says mineral sunscreens, like zinc oxide and titanium dioxide, are natural and nontoxic. These sit on top of your skin and block the skin like reflectors. On the other hand, chemical sunscreens—oxybenzone, octinoxate, octisalate, and avobenzone—are absorbed into the skin before they can protect from the sun's radiation. She says the ingredients absorb the sun's rays and convert them into heat that is released from the skin.

While Rogers says chemical sunscreens provide good UVA and UVB protection and are better than not using anything, they are absorbed into your body. "We can measure them in our blood and urine," she explains. "Even though they are well-studied, labeled by the FDA as nontoxic, do not cause cancer (despite some reports out there), and have NOT been shown to cause hormone disruption in humans, they do accumulate in us. I would like to minimize the accumulation of any unneeded chemicals in my body, my patients' bodies, and in our world whenever possible. Further, avobenzone is a common cause of sunscreen allergy, and oxybenzone is contributing to the death of coral reefs."

PHOTO: @AYSHA.SOW

When it comes to mineral sunscreens, Rogers prefers ones that contain zinc oxide because it protects against UVB rays (which cause burns) and UVA rays (which can come through windows and cause brown spots and wrinkles). "Titanium dioxide is another good physical sunscreen, but it only protects from UVB rays, so products need to have both titanium dioxide and zinc oxide to provide broad-spectrum protection," she explains.

What's the Deal With SPF?

PHOTO: @HIMICHELELI

I've always reached for the higher SPF because I always thought the bigger number, the better, but I didn't really understand the science behind it. "Dermatologists recommend using a sunscreen with an SPF of at least 30, which blocks 97% of the sun's UVB rays," says Ellen Marmur, MD, a board-certified dermatologist and founder of [Marmur Medical](#) in New York City. "The higher-number SPFs do block the sun's UVB rays slightly more. Of course, it's important to remember that even high-number SPFs need to be reapplied throughout the day."

And Rogers adds, "SPF only describes protection from UVB rays, the sunburn rays that also damage your skin's DNA. UVA rays penetrate the skin more deeply, causing wrinkles and brown spots. Instead of looking for a product with the highest SPF, look for a product with at least an SPF of 30 that is also labeled broad-spectrum protection."

Does My Skin Type Matter When Choosing a Sunscreen?

PHOTO: @EVEMEETSWEST

Rogers says finding one that is good for your particular skin type will take some hunting and experimenting. "If you have dry skin, look for formulations that have hydrating ingredients," she explains. "If you have oily skin, opt for something with a matte finish that's oil-free. If you have sensitive skin, mineral-based sunscreens are particularly important because the most common chemical sunscreens can be irritating, while zinc oxide is calming. Your sunscreen should be just that—sunscreen. You will still need to use an antioxidant and a moisturizer prior to its application. The all-in-one products never work as well as specialized products, with the exception that face sunscreen can also work as a light foundation."

And there's a common misconception that zinc sunscreens don't work well with sensitive or acne-prone skin. Rogers says that they're actually a better choice than chemical versions because they're a natural anti-inflammatory and are less likely to cause allergies.

Lotions vs. Sprays

PHOTO: @ALICEZIELASKO

I go back and forth between using lotion and spray on my body, so I wanted to know if there was a difference in effectiveness. It turns out it's mostly based on personal preference. "What is most important is for sunscreen to be applied daily and reapplied throughout the day to ensure your skin is consistently protected," Marmur says. "When using an aerosol sunscreen, I recommend holding the can about four to six inches from the body and slowly applying liberally onto the skin until it becomes visible. I would then gently spread the formulas to your neck, ears, chest, back, etc., to ensure you did not miss any sections of your body. When using a lotion body sunscreen, I would use at least a shot glass amount and spread over the skin using circular motions."

And Rogers suggests you keep a variety of sunscreen products for different activities and different areas of your body. "You need the one you wear every day, the water-resistant one you use when you go to the beach or pool, the powder version you use on your hair part and to reapply during the day when you are wearing makeup," she explains. "I like my skincare products to be specialists. Often, the more a single product claims to do, the less likely it is to do all those things well."

Application Tips

PHOTO: @ALYSSAINTHECITY

First and foremost, both Rogers and Marmur recommended reapplying sunscreen every two to three hours when you're outside, even when it's cloudy.

For chemical sunscreens, you should apply before you put on moisturizer, as it needs to be absorbed into your skin, Rogers adds. As for mineral sunscreens, apply after your moisturizer but before your makeup.

And even if you're spending more time indoors, you still have to apply sunscreen, Marmur advises. "I have several patients who have shared with me that their melasma is actually getting worse, yet they have not been outside," she explains. "What we need to remember is that we need to wear sunscreen even inside our house because of the sun's harmful UVA/UVB rays. Even the blue infrared light emanating from our computer screens can cause damage to our skin!"

Best Body Sunscreens

Now that we're all pretty well-versed in the general ins and outs of sunscreens, you might find yourself wanting to trade some of your bottles for new ones. Here are some of our favorites for the whole body, categorized by mineral and chemical.

Mineral Sunscreens

ELTA MD

UV Shield Broad-Spectrum SPF 45

\$32

SHOP NOW

This sheer sunscreen is recommended for oily to normal skin types. It contains 9% zinc oxide and antioxidants to protect against free radicals.

SUPERGOOP!

Play 100% Mineral Mist SPF 30 With Marigold Extract

\$34

SHOP NOW

We're big fans of Supergoop! sunscreens and the brand's mineral mist spray is no exception. The water- and sweat-resistant formula also features marigold extract to smooth and protect skin, sunflower seed oil to retain moisture, and chamomile extract to soothe.

COOLA

Mineral Body Sunscreen SPF 50

\$32

SHOP NOW

Coola's mineral sunscreen contains a mix of titanium dioxide and zinc oxide to provide UVA and UVB protection. Other ingredients include red raspberry seed oil, buriti oil, meadowfoam seed oil, and prickly pear extract. They're all antioxidant-rich to protect and hydrate the skin.

ÈMINENCE

Lilikoi Mineral Defense Sport Sunscreen SPF 30

\$52

SHOP NOW

Èminence is a favorite organic skincare brand of WWW beauty director Erin Jahns, associate beauty editor Shawna Hudson, and also Meghan Markle. Its zinc oxide sunscreen also features lilikoi (passion fruit) seed oil, which is packed with vitamin C and works to reduce the appearance of aging skin.

VERSED

**Guards Up Daily Mineral Sunscreen
Broad Spectrum Spf 35**

\$25

SHOP NOW

Versed's mineral sunscreen is super lightweight but will provide extra protection against the sun, environmental damage, and even blue-light damage from those screens. It has a creamy feel that doesn't leave a white cast.

ELTA MD

UV Active Broad-Spectrum SPF 50+

\$34

SHOP NOW

Marmur recommends Elta MD's UV Active mineral sport sunscreen, which is water-resistant for up to 80 minutes. "This is a great everyday sunscreen that can be applied when you wake up in the morning and then be left in your bag to be reapplied throughout the day," she says. "So when you go shopping, gardening, or

exercising outside, you can rest assured that your skin is receiving the protection it needs."

AVÈNE

**Solaire UV Mineral Multi-Defense
Sunscreen SPF 50+**

\$34

SHOP NOW

Avène's body sunscreen features 100% mineral filters to provide the ultimate in UVA/UVB protection. It's also infused with vitamin E for free-radical protection. And it leaves a matte finish, so you won't feel sticky or slick after applying.

CLINIQUE

Broad Spectrum SPF 30 Mineral Sunscreen Lotion for Body

\$36

[SHOP NOW](#)

This sunscreen is easy to apply and super gentle, especially for sensitive skin. It's formulated with titanium dioxide and zinc oxide.

BLUE LIZARD

Sensitive Mineral Sunscreen SPF 30

\$15

[SHOP NOW](#)

This mineral sunscreen is both paraben- and fragrance-free, so it won't irritate the skin. It's also water-resistant for up to 40 minutes, so it's good for the beach, pool, or any other outdoor activity. And the bottle turns blue when exposed to UV rays, so it also acts as a reminder to apply or reapply.

RAW ELEMENTS

Face + Body Organic SPF 30 Zinc Sunscreen

\$22

SHOP NOW

Raw Elements' sunscreen is top-rated by the Environmental Working Group. The gentle and moisturizing formula provides protection for up to 80 minutes. It's also soy-, gluten-, and nut-free for anyone with those sensitivities.

CERA VE

100% Mineral Sunscreen SPF 50

\$14

SHOP NOW

CeraVe's mineral sunscreen is also formulated with ceramides to lock in moisture and protect the skin's barrier. And people with sensitive skin don't have to worry—it's allergy-tested and oil- and fragrance-free.

Chemical Sunscreens

NEUTROGENA

**Beach Defense Sunscreen Lotion With
Broad Spectrum SPF 70**

\$10

SHOP NOW

A must for summer beach days, Neutrogena's water-resistant sunscreen protects for up to 80 minutes. It's also fast-absorbing, lightweight, and PABA-free.

LA ROCHE-POSAY

**Anthelios Ultra-Light Sunscreen Lotion
Spray Broad Spectrum SPF 60**

\$27

SHOP NOW

It's so easy to spray this lightweight sunscreen from La

Roche-Posay. It doesn't leave a greasy finish, and it provides even coverage. The formula also contains antioxidant protection to defend against those pesky free radicals.

SHISEIDO

Ultimate Sun Protector Lotion SPF 50+ Sunscreen

\$50

[SHOP NOW](#)

This one made senior editor Allyson Payer's list of [favorite suncare products](#). The formula is super high-tech. It has HeatForce Technology, which senses heat and creates a stronger barrier, and WetForce Technology, which adds another layer of sunscreen protection with exposure to perspiration or water.

HAWAIIAN TROPIC

AntiOxidant+ Sunscreen Lotion SPF 50

\$14

[SHOP NOW](#)

Hawaiian Tropics' non-greasy sunscreen is packed with antioxidants to leave an extra layer of protection. And if you prefer a scent, this one has a tropical-inspired fragrance that will transport you to a lush island (even when you're far from it).

SOLEIL TOUJOURS

Clean Conscious Body Sunscreen Mist with Vitamin C

\$36

[SHOP NOW](#)

A lot of sunscreens can leave you feeling so oily and weighed down, but this one from Soleil Toujours delivers the opposite feeling. The lightweight formula is super cooling and goes on totally clear. The antioxidant-rich product also contains vitamins C and E, and aloe leaf juice to nourish skin.

COPPERTONE

Glow Hydrating Sunscreen Lotion

\$7

[SHOP NOW](#)

Meet another [favorite of Payer](#). This sunscreen from Coppertone is infused with shimmery particles to leave you looking glowy. It's also free of parabens, PABA, and phthalates.

SUN BUM

Original Sunscreen Spray

\$18

[SHOP NOW](#)

Good for all skin types, Sun Bum's spray is packed with vitamin E to protect and moisturize. It's water-resistant for up to 80 minutes and is oil-free.

BANANA BOAT

Ultra Defense Sunscreen SPF 100

\$11

SHOP NOW

Banana Boat's sunscreens always remind me of summer. This version is enriched with aloe and vitamins A and E to soothe and protect. It's also lightweight, water-resistant, and rub-free.

This article was originally published at an earlier date and has since been updated.

Next up, [These Are the Only Sunscreens Beauty Editors Will Wear Under Makeup](#)

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