

SAFELY sun-kissed

A golden tan and protected skin: can you have both? We posed this question to dermatologists. BY BRONWYN CROSS

The sun is out and the outdoors beckoning, but before you swap your clothes for swimwear, have you thought about where your skin's health fits into your tanning plan? With 1.2 million non-melanoma skin cancer diagnoses reported by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2020, it should be top of mind. According to the same report, melanoma, the deadlier skin cancer, accounted for 1 777 cancer diagnoses and 480 deaths in South Africa last year. As a nation, we love our summers in the sun, and the tan to show for it – so does properly protecting your skin spell the end of that golden tan for good?

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOUR SKIN TANS

The “natural” tan you have in mind is achievable, but not if you want healthy skin. Dr Tarryn Jacobs, a Pretoria specialist dermatologist, explains: “After your skin has been exposed to sunlight, your pigment cells produce more melanin, causing the skin to become darker, in an attempt to absorb more UV radiation. A tan is a sign that the skin has been damaged and is trying to protect itself.” All of that tanning can end up causing damage and mutations to the DNA in your skin cells, leading to an increased chance of developing skin cancer.

HOW SUNSCREEN PROTECTS YOUR SKIN

Sunlight includes a powerful combination of ultraviolet A and B rays (what we know as UVA and UVB radiation). When you're sunning yourself, it's the UVB rays that cause sunburn, giving you the darker tone. Then, UVA rays penetrate deeper, causing your skin to age quicker. Both UVA and UVB rays can increase your cancer risk. All in all, your long-term beauty and overall health don't win. Sunscreen works to block or absorb the radiation. “I recommend choosing a sunscreen with a minimum sun-protection factor (SPF) of 30,” says Dr Jacobs. “Also, look for the words ‘broad spectrum’, meaning it covers both UVA and UVB rays.”

FINDING THE HAPPY MEDIUM

Everyone should prioritise the health of their skin over a temporary tan. “Don't think that if you have darker skin, you won't experience sun damage. There is still a risk,” adds Dr Jacobs. The good news is you can have healthy skin and enjoy the look of a golden tan the fake way. “A self-tanner is the healthiest way to give your skin

a glow without damaging it,” she adds.

Self-tanners have an ingredient called dihydroxyacetone, or DHA, which reacts with the amino acids in your skin to produce a pigment. Importantly, Cape Town dermatologist Dr Dilshaad Asmal points out that DHA can decrease the effectiveness of sunscreen when combined in the same product. “The UVB filter is unaffected, which means you won't necessarily burn. However, the UVA filter loses effectiveness,” she says. How to get around this? Easy: apply your fake tanner the night before or as many as a few days before you plan to be in the sun. This will give it enough time to work its magic, but not interfere with the UVA protection in the broad-spectrum sunscreen you apply before going out.

If you take the self-tanner route this summer, first prep your skin by shaving and exfoliating. Apply the tanner, let it do its thing, and when it comes time to apply sunscreen, use two tablespoons for the entire body (including half a teaspoon for your face alone) for adequate protection, advises Dr Jacobs. ☺

Don't I need sun to get my vitamin D fill?

“Unfortunately, there is currently no precise level of sun exposure that will safely provide you with vitamin D, while not putting you at risk of skin cancer,” says Dr Jacobs. “This is because there are so many variables – for example, your personal skin type, geographical location and time of day.”

Since no sunscreen offers 100% protection, Dr Asmal says a few minutes of protected sun exposure can give you your daily vitamin D requirement. But with so many foods fortified with vitamin D these days, and supplements widely available, adequate vitamin D levels can be achieved without sun exposure. “A diet rich in milk, yoghurt, orange juice, tuna, salmon and mackerel can provide adequate vitamin D,” Dr Asmal concludes.

Your tan plan

- 1/ La Roche-Posay Anthelios Invisible Fluid SPF 50+ 50ml, R269** – “This is an ultra-light sunscreen offering excellent protection, and is suitable for all skin tones as it leaves no white cast,” says Dr Jacobs.
- 2/ The Body Shop Coconut Bronze Gradual Tan Lotion 100ml, R340** – Ideal for even the most sensitive skin, this lightweight formula is made with 100% natural-origin DHA, and glides right on to your skin without leaving a sticky residue.
- 3/ Caribbeantan Post Tan Body Butter Milk & Honey 200ml, R89⁹⁹** – Tired of your self-tanner fading on you too soon? This moisturising body butter is specially formulated to put a stop to that, thanks to its cranberry fruit seed extract formula. Apply to dry areas before your usual self-tanner routine, and enjoy silky-soft skin and an enviable glow without the need for constant touch-ups.



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