BEAUTY

Your Lips Belong in Your Sun-Protection Plan

The skin you routinely miss can burn and collect ultraviolet damage, but protecting it does not require an elaborate routine.

The spot sunscreen misses

You are heading outside, sunscreen spread across your face, and feeling reasonably prepared. Yet one exposed strip is easy to pass over: your lips. They sit in the sun while you walk, work, swim or eat outdoors, but they rarely receive the deliberate coverage given to a forehead or nose.

That omission matters because ultraviolet (UV) rays can pass through skin and damage skin cells. A sunburn is not simply temporary redness; it is a sign of that damage. Repeated overexposure can contribute to premature wrinkling, age spots and a higher risk of skin cancer. Lips deserve protection for the same unglamorous reason as the rest of your exposed skin: UV radiation reaches them.

The risk does not disappear when the day feels cool. UV rays can damage skin in any season and at any temperature, and exposure continues on cloudy days and in the shade. Snow and light-coloured sand can reflect UV radiation, allowing it to reach exposed skin from above and below. Weather that feels gentle is therefore not a reliable guide to what your skin is receiving.

Sunlight contains ultraviolet A (UVA) and ultraviolet B (UVB) rays that reach the Earth's surface. UVA can travel beyond the top layer of skin and damage connective tissue; UVB does not penetrate as deeply but can cause sunburn. Both can contribute to skin cancer. A product described as broad-spectrum is intended to protect against both types.

Damage does not need a tan

A tan can look like evidence that your skin coped well. It is evidence of the opposite. Skin makes more melanin after UVA exposure as it tries to protect itself from further damage. By the time skin has darkened, some cells have already been damaged. A so-called base tan also causes damage and does not prevent a later sunburn.

Indoor tanning offers no loophole. Tanning beds expose skin to UVA and some UVB, with a higher concentration of UVA than outdoor tanning. That makes deliberately tanning your face-and the lips within it-a poor substitute for sun protection. The relevant question is not

whether the colour came from a holiday or a tanning bed, but whether UV radiation reached your skin.

The sun is generally strongest around the middle of the day. Guidance varies slightly, identifying either 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. or 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. as the period to limit exposure. That difference should not become an excuse to chase an exact safe minute. If you can move an outdoor task away from the middle of the day or take a break in shade or indoors, you reduce exposure.

Some medicines can also increase sensitivity to sunlight and the chance of burning. The listed examples include thiazides, diuretics, tetracycline, doxycycline, sulfa antibiotics and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen. If you use a medicine and have questions about sun sensitivity, that has moved beyond a lifestyle guess: ask a healthcare professional rather than assuming your usual protection is enough.

Your lips do not need a complicated ritual. They need to stop being the exception.

Protection is a physical job

The most direct advice is easy to understand and easy to perform incompletely: apply sunscreen to exposed skin, including the lips. General guidance recommends a sun protective factor (SPF) of at least 15, while workplace guidance for people outdoors recommends at least SPF 30. Broad-spectrum protection matters because it covers both UVA and UVB.

Application is only the beginning. Guidance says to put sunscreen on before sun exposure and reapply it at least every two hours, as well as after getting out of water or sweating heavily. Wind, humidity, perspiration and the quality of application can affect performance. In other words, the product in your pocket cannot protect the patch you forgot or the coverage that has worn away.

A wide-brimmed hat adds a barrier rather than asking sunscreen to do every part of the job. Tightly woven fabric offers better protection than a loose weave, and dark clothing is more protective than light-coloured, loosely woven clothing. No single layer makes you invulnerable. Shade, timing, clothing and sunscreen work as a set of practical barriers.

The supplied evidence does not establish that swallowing a supplement can replace those barriers. A 2025 systematic review of 47 studies found the greatest evidence for photoprotection with polyphenols, carotenoid-based supplements and Polypodium leucotomos. But the studies were limited by small samples and short duration, and evidence was weakest for isolated vitamins and coenzyme Q. The review did not settle optimal doses or duration-and it did not make sunscreen optional.

The same evidence also cannot tell you that a costly lip product protects better than a cheaper one. It supports broad-spectrum sunscreen and an adequate SPF, not a prestige formula, flavour or finish. The useful comparison is the protection stated by the product, followed by whether you apply it to the lips and renew it when coverage has been disrupted.

Monday takes sunscreen and a hat

At the start of next week, put two ordinary objects beside the things you take outdoors: a broad-spectrum sunscreen suitable for use on the lips and a wide-brimmed, tightly woven hat. This is not an elaborate beauty routine. It is a way to make the overlooked step visible before you leave.

Apply the sunscreen before going outside, remembering the lips along with other exposed areas. Carry it when you will remain outdoors so reapplication is possible. Use the hat as another layer, and choose shade or an indoor break when you can, particularly around the middle of the day. On cloudy days, keep the same plan.

If the lips or surrounding skin burn, avoid further sun exposure until the burn has healed. Cool wet cloths can soothe a minor burn, and drinking water can replace fluid losses. Do not break blisters, because that can slow healing and increase the risk of infection. Severe sunburn, dehydration, a high fever or extreme pain lasting longer than 48 hours calls for medical attention.

Make regular skin checks part of the same habit. New or changing spots, or changes in the size, shape, colour or feel of an existing mark, should be shown to a healthcare professional. You do not need to become an expert examiner. You only need to notice when something is different and act on it.

The useful change is small enough to survive an ordinary Monday: sunscreen for the exposed skin you tend to miss, plus a hat that does not depend on perfect application. Your lips do not need a complicated ritual. They need to stop being the exception.

Where this comes from

- Sun Exposure

  MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine · https://medlineplus.gov/sunexposure.html
- Tanning

  MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine · https://medlineplus.gov/tanning.html



- Sun Exposure at Work | Outdoor | CDC

  Centers for Disease Control and Prevention · https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/outdoor-workers/about/sun-exposure.html
- Oral Supplements and Photoprotection: A Systematic Review.

  Journal of medicinal food, 2025 · https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/39804624/