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When Tanning Gets Out of Hand

By NATASHA SINGER

ABOUT one third of American adults had at least one sunburn in 2004, 2003 and 1999, according to telephone surveys of about 700,000 people by the federal [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). Among people who said they had been burned in the previous year, two thirds had more than one sunburn, according to an article last year in the CDC Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report.

Sunburn occurs when overexposure to the sun's ultraviolet rays kills cells in the top layer of skin and triggers reactions like inflammation, redness, pain and blistering, said Dr. Mandy L. Warthan, a dermatologist in Dallas.

For mild discomfort, Dr. Warthan recommended ibuprofen or naproxen to bring down inflammation. For more acute sunburns, she suggested corticosteroid creams. She also recommended cold water compresses or cool, but not icy, baths to relieve inflamed skin and fragrance-free moisturizers for dryness and flakiness.

But there is no consensus among doctors on how to treat acute sunburn, which can include symptoms like severe skin inflammation, peeling and fever.

Indeed, there is no definitive proof that common therapies like corticosteroids, antihistamines and antioxidants are effective treatments for acute sunburn, according to an article published in the American Journal of Clinical Dermatology in 2005 that reviewed 40 sunburn studies. Dr. Howard I. Maibach, an author of the article and a dermatology professor at the medical school of the University of California, San Francisco, wrote that studies showed that such treatments are actually ineffective at decreasing recovery time.

"Regardless of the treatment modality, the damage to epidermal cells is the same," the article said.

Still, Dr. Warthan said that, even if such treatments can't accelerate sunburn recovery or repair skin damage, they may help with problems like pain, swelling, itching and flaking. "It is purely symptomatic relief," she said.

But the analysis by Dr. Maibach concluded that there is a simpler way to reduce sunburn damage.

"No matter what is used to alleviate the discomfort of sunburn, there is no better way, at this time, to treat sunburn than prevention with physical protection and sunscreens," the report said.

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