

Sun Smart Skin from the Esthetician's Point of View

By Victoria Wigg, LME

Through the ages, having a sun tan has gone from being undesirable to being a show of status. However, as we better understand the damage caused to our DNA from overexposure to ultraviolet light, we recognize the danger behind the beauty of sun-bronzed skin.

Every time we step into the sun, we battle three different waves of ultraviolet light—UVA, UVB and UVC. While UVB is the wave responsible for tanned skin and sunburns, all three, in excess, damage the skin. This damage can range from premature wrinkles, hyperpigmentation and the breakdown of elasticity to DNA damage and even skin cancer. While the effects sometimes take years to show up, many experts believe the majority of damage occurs in the first twenty years of life. Fortunately, by utilizing proven ingredients daily, you can help prevent and reverse many of the signs of trauma.

Sunscreen is a critical part of skin protection. There are certain factors to look for when choosing a sunscreen. For instance, is the active ingredient mineral or chemical-based? Common chemical forms include avobenzene (parsol 1789), octinoxate, octisalate, octocrylene, oxybenzone, ecamule (Mexoryl SX), homosalate, Padimate A and Padimate O. In contrast, there are only two mineral sunscreens approved by the FDA—titanium dioxide and zinc oxide.

Chemical sunscreens work by absorbing the sun's rays, while mineral sunscreens reflect them away from the skin. For this reason, many skin professionals today recommend the mineral form, which is also available in certain mineral makeup.

When it comes to combating the signs of damage, antioxidants are essential. UV overexposure often creates free radical cascades where highly unstable molecules with unpaired electrons tax the body. Antioxidants help relieve this stress by sacrificing an electron to neutralize the free radical threat. Look for tetrahydrocurcuminoids, oat glucan, D-alpha tocopherol, tocomin, astaxanthin, gluconolactone, and my favorite, L-superoxide dismutase, when comparing products. Other reparative ingredients to consider include aminoguanidine, aloe vera, copper complex and niacinamide.

Restorative treatments, like exfoliating facials, chemical peels, intense pulsed light and laser treatments, work to correct past damage. Effective corrective ingredients include vitamin A, lactic acid, malic acid, tartaric acid, azelaic acid, arbutin, L-ascorbic acid (vitamin C), cassia beta glycan and epidermal growth factors.

Despite the effectiveness of today's treatments, it is still much easier to protect the skin than to reverse the signs of damage. Using proper sunscreen, avoiding the sun at the highest point of the day—11 a.m. to 3 p.m.—wearing a large brim hat and using an umbrella are sensible ways to enjoy the sunshine and soak up a little vitamin D without reaping all of the negative benefits of UV exposure. For existing sun damage, see a licensed skin professional for a complete analysis of your skin and recommendations on how to correct it.

