

## **Ask Dr. Mikell**

*By Dr. Oswald Mikell*

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American Board of Dermatology | American Board of Cosmetic Surgery | Physician of the Year 2008

### **Sunburn**

Living here in the sunny Lowcountry automatically increases your risk of sunburn, and you can very easily experience too much exposure. Maybe you weren't planning to be outdoors for long as you were, or you didn't use adequate protection - or maybe, you were fooled by thinking you can't burn on a cloudy day. As much as 90 percent of UV rays pass through clouds, burning your skin as severely as direct sunlight. You'll know within a few hours of sun exposure if you have a sunburn, but it may take a day or more to know the full extent and severity. You will experience pain, redness, swelling and occasional blistering. Because exposure often affects a large area of your skin, sunburn can also cause headache, fever and fatigue.

#### **Q. What should I know about sunburns?**

**A.** You can prevent sunburn by always protecting your skin before you go outdoors – even if you don't plan to be in the direct sunlight. If you do get sunburned, several home remedies and treatments can relieve some of your discomfort and help to speed the healing of your skin.

#### **Q. What can I do to relieve the symptoms?**

**A.** Take a cool bath or shower. Adding 1/2 cup of cornstarch, oatmeal or baking soda to your bath water can soothe the burn. Also, applying aloe vera lotion several times a day will help provide some relief. If needed, take an over-the-counter pain reliever such as aspirin, ibuprofen or Tylenol. Do not give children or teenagers aspirin. It may cause Reye's syndrome, a rare but potentially fatal disease.

#### **Q. What about good old-fashioned home remedies – like applying butter?**

**A.** Do not use butter or petroleum jelly on your sunburn. They can prevent or delay healing.

#### **Q. How long will the healing process take?**

**A.** Within a few days, your body will start to heal itself by "peeling" the top layer of damaged skin. After peeling, your skin may temporarily have an irregular color and pattern. Depending on the severity, it may take several days or more for the sunburn to heal.

#### **Q. What should I do if I begin to blister?**

**A.** First of all, leave blisters intact to speed healing and avoid infection. If they burst on their own, apply an antibacterial ointment on the open areas. If the blisters are severe, not healing properly, or if you experience immediate complications, such as rash, itching or fever, see a doctor.

#### **Q. How do I know if I have an infection?**

**A.** You may experience increasing pain, tenderness, and swelling, yellow drainage (pus) from an open blister, or red streaks, leading away from the open blister, which may extend in a line upward along the arm or leg.

#### **Q. How do I know if need to see a doctor?**

**A.** If blistering and covers a large portion of your body, if you're running a high fever, have extreme pain, confusion, nausea, chills, or if you don't respond to home care within a few days, call a physician.

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