

Sun Protection Failures

A new report casts a bad light on popular sunscreens

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GREEN CITY Have you ever spent a day at the beach, dutifully slathering yourself with sunscreen — only to return home with the unmistakable prickle of a sunburn?

It's probably because your sunscreen isn't doing what it claims, according to a recent analysis conducted by the Washington, DC-based Environmental Working Group. The nonpartisan, nonprofit group known for watchdogging consumer products studied 952 sunscreens with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 15 or higher and discovered that 80 percent contain harmful chemicals and didn't really protect skin from the most damaging rays of the sun.

And, the report charged, the three top selling sunscreen companies — Coppertone, Banana Boat, and Neutrogena — produce some of the most toxic and useless products. Even ones you might find on the shelves of your health food store, like Alba organic lavender sunscreen, contain oxybenzone, which allegedly disrupts hormones.

Although there is no definitive science on the effects of oxybenzone, studies have shown that "mothers with high levels of oxybenzone in their systems were more likely to have low birth weight baby girls," said Rebecca Sutton, a staff scientist with a PhD in environmental chemistry who works for the Oakland office of EWG.

Julie Lux, a spokesperson for Coppertone, said the company's products are reviewed by independent scientists and dermatologists and said she's "concerned that reports like the one released by the Environmental Working Group (EWG) will inappropriately discourage consumers from protecting themselves from the sun."

Ariel Kern, a spokesperson for Sun Pharmaceuticals, said the company "stands behind the safety and efficacy of Banana Boat products" and Iris Grossman, a spokesperson for Neutrogena, said that company's products have been patented and tested.

A sunscreen's SPF indicates protection from the short-wave UVB rays that cause sunburn, but it's the long-wave ultraviolet radiation (UVA) that is more directly linked to cancer. Even so, protecting against UVA radiation isn't currently required. Furthermore, nearly 50 percent of the products tested by EWG deteriorated in the sun, "raising questions about whether these products last as long as the label says," read the report.

The Food and Drug Administration has the authority to regulate sunscreens, but the agency's standards have been a 30-year work in progress and are relatively limited. Despite a congressional mandate to update the regs by May 2006, the FDA is just now entering the latter stages of its rulemaking, spokesperson Rita Chappelle told us.

Currently the agency is proposing more thorough labeling protocols, including a new four-star system for UVA protection. Additionally, sunscreen manufacturers will not be allowed to say that their products are waterproof, and the upper threshold of SPF will rise from 30 to 50+.

In an attempt to light a fire under the FDA, Sens. Christopher J. Dodd (D-Conn.) and Jack Reed (D-R.I.) have introduced the Sunscreen Labeling Protection Act of 2008, which would require finalized sunscreen safety standards within 180 days.

Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal released a statement supporting the legislation. "The FDA has failed to implement proposed sunscreen labeling rules that would bar false claims about all-day protection, waterproof, broad spectrum UVA/UVB protection, and SPF over 50," he wrote.

Claims on the label are also a factor in the potential danger of sunscreens. "With claims like 'all day protection' people don't reapply," Sutton said.

Though EWG's analysis (which can be found at www.cosmeticdatabase.com) was criticized as "junk science" by one doctor cited in a New York Times report, the group stands by its work. "We use industry standard methods, so it's hard for criticism to stand," Sutton said.

EWG's ratings were based on three factors: UVB protection, which SPF indicates; UVA protection, which blocks the more harmful rays; and overall stability of the ingredients. The group recommends that sunbathers search for products with zinc oxide and titanium dioxide, which are less readily absorbed by the skin and provide more of a physical barrier between users and the sun. While these minerals may be safe on your skin, they're not so great in your lungs. So give the spray and powder versions a pass, and beware products that have been reduced to nanoparticle size. And, of course, spend more time in the shade.