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Yes, Black People Do Need To Wear Sunscreen



It seems every spring and summer, when the sun starts to get a little high in the sky, the debate about sunscreen and melanin is given new life. This year was no exception: There were [articles](#) and [Twitter debates](#) about whether sunscreen is necessary — or even healthy — for Black people and people of color.

To settle this question, HuffPost reached out to some experts to answer your burning questions about the sun, sunscreen, skin cancer and the best ways to make sure your Black doesn't crack (or worse) under the sun.

Do Black people need sunscreen?

Short answer: Yes.

“One of the first things I ask my clients is, ‘Do you wear sunscreen?’ and they’re always like, ‘Oh no! I don’t have to!’” Latoya Chaplin, a Black [esthetician](#) from Maryland who specializes in Black skin, told HuffPost. “I think a lot of Black women believe that just because they’re not burning [like white people], they’re not getting sun damage.”

There is a belief that Black skin’s melanin, the pigment that makes skin darker, naturally protects skin from the sun and its UV rays, creating a barrier against the negative effects of the sun. But as Dr. Sheel Desai Solomon, a [dermatologist](#) in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina, explained, that’s not necessarily the case.

“An African American person has melanin (a natural skin protectant) that blocks UV light up to SPF 13,” Solomon told HuffPost. “This isn’t as strong as the sunscreen (SPF 30 is recommended) which is created for skin protection. Yes, sunscreen is needed.”

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- DR. SHEEL DESAI SOLOMON

There’s been debate about whether sunscreen is [more harmful than helpful](#), since the skin can absorb chemicals from sunscreen into the bloodstream. However, the FDA has not determined these chemicals to be unsafe and the agency still [stresses the importance of wearing sunscreen](#) in order to prevent other deadly diseases. Even in the winter, Solomon suggests putting on sunscreen to protect from UV radiation.

“No matter how thick those overcast clouds look in the winter, up to 80 percent of the sun’s rays can still penetrate them,” she explained. “Everyone must protect his or her skin from the sun. While darker skin does not burn as easily, it’s the damage you can’t see right away that is particularly worrisome.”

That damage from the sun can come in many forms, from hyperpigmentation, wrinkles, dark spots, sunburns and even cancers. "African American people often think that because they have more melanin that they have 'natural sunscreen,'" Solomon said. "That places them in grave danger because it's not enough to completely ward off the threat of skin cancer, no matter how dark their skin may be."

Even in the colder months, Dr. Sheel Desai Solomon still recommends wearing sun protection: "No matter how thick those overcast clouds look in the winter, up to 80 percent of the sun's rays can still penetrate them."

Can Black people get skin cancer?

Short answer: Also yes.

"People who have dark skin tones often believe they're not at risk for skin cancer, but that is a dangerous misconception. Anyone can get skin cancer, regardless of race," Solomon shared.

There are three common types of skin cancer. [Melanoma](#) is the most dangerous and the most likely to grow and spread. [Basal cell carcinoma](#) and [squamous cell carcinoma](#) are also common and usually occur in sun-exposed areas of the skin, but they are much less dangerous. Plus, Black people (and everyone else) are at risk of developing other rare forms of skin cancer that are difficult to diagnose and treat.

Take the case of Mylah Howard, for instance. When she was starting college in the fall of 2011, she noticed some abnormalities in her brown skin. "I started to notice these white circles all over my body and they were spreading," Howard, now 27 and living in Atlanta, told HuffPost. "I was looking like a little Dalmatian with these white spots on my brown skin. At first I didn't think anything of it, doctors told me it was a sunburn." After several trips to different dermatologists across the country, Howard was eventually diagnosed with [cutaneous T-cell lymphoma](#), a rare cancer that affects the skin. Howard underwent over a year of radiation therapy and is currently in remission, but will never be cured of the disease.

While skin cancer is [very rare](#) in African Americans (and cancer like Howard's is even rarer), Black people are more likely to die from cancer once they have contracted it. According to the Skin Cancer Foundation, the overall melanoma survival rate for African Americans is [only 65 percent](#), versus 91 percent for Caucasians. This disparity, according to dermatologists like

Solomon, is simply because of late detection and many Black Americans' lack of awareness about skin diseases and the effects of sun exposure.

So, should everyone just stay out of the sun?

Absolutely not. Exposure to sunlight can be beneficial to your health if you're careful.

"I have psoriasis and my dermatologist actually tells me to go sit outside for 30 minutes a day," Chaplin shared about her own skincare journey. "Sun has great benefits but constantly laying out in the sun and not protecting the skin is harmful. Sunlight is good, but long term exposure to UV rays is not."

"Doctors can't confirm that the sun did or didn't cause my illness but the sun can still heal me," Howard added. "There's not a cure for it, it's something I'm going to have for the rest of my life but [my doctors] actually encouraged me to go out into the sun. They said the sun can help my body." Sunlight is a great source of vitamin D, which is necessary for [calcium absorption and bone health](#). Vitamin D deficiency can cause a number of diseases like heart disease and diabetes, illnesses that African Americans are already [more at risk of developing](#).

"Americans aren't exposed to as much sunlight as we used to be — either because we're inside watching TV or hunched over computers or avoiding the sun to prevent skin cancer," Solomon said. "It's fine for African Americans to spend time in the sun, provided they are protected with SPF 30." "It's fine for African Americans to spend time in the sun, provided they are protected with SPF 30," Solomon said.

Does Black truly not crack?

There's a widespread belief that Black skin is immune to the ravages of time, and that melanin protects faces and bodies from aging and environmental harm. The phrase "[Black don't crack](#)" has become something of a motto and a myth in the Black community, a phenomenon seen on the faces of stars like 60-year-old Angela Bassett and 94-year-old Cicely Tyson.

Is this true? Does Black skin have special healing and protective properties? "While there is some truth in this old adage, Black skin still does show aging in the skin through a more mottled appearance, plus hyper pigmentation, age spots and small pigments," Solomon explained.

“If you go your whole life without wearing sunscreen, your skin is going to look pretty close to cracked eventually,” Chaplin added.

“We all say, ‘Black don’t crack.’ But we can take care of our Black even more with very simple steps in our skincare.”

- MYLAH HOWARD

Despite these rampant myths around Black skin, most dermatology research has focused on Caucasian skin.

“Sadly, despite a growing volume of varied skin tones in the United States, the specialists charged with treating these contrasting pigments are lacking in color,” Solomon said. “Dermatologists themselves are not focusing studies on African American skincare.”

A [2012 study](#) found that 47 percent of dermatologists believed their medical training was inadequate to help them treat skin conditions in Black patients. Other research found that doctors are [less likely to be suspicious of symptoms](#) of melanoma and other skin cancers in Black and Latinx patients, which can contribute to late diagnoses and poor prognoses. Howard recalls needing to visit multiple doctors before finally finding a Black dermatologist who biopsied her skin and diagnosed her, more than a year after she first noticed her skin abnormalities.

“The biggest thing [my skin cancer] taught me is that as a Black woman, I need to see a Black doctor,” Howard added. “I’m hoping that there will be more research on the market sooner than later.”

She learned that the best way to combat this misinformation and lack of research is by having more conversations about skin care with her peers. “In the media, it’s always white people putting sunblock on. There’s even this [little white girl on the bottles!](#)” Howard said. “I don’t remember skincare being mentioned in my academics, in health class, or in school. I never talked with my friends like, ‘Make sure you use sunblock!’ ... We all say, ‘Black don’t crack.’ But we can take care of our Black even more with very simple steps in our skincare.”

Bodies provide a lot of information on their own: It’s important to be aware of the signs and symptoms of skin damage and take steps to protect skin or get treatment before things get worse.

“In people with brown or Black skin, skin cancer often develops on parts of the body that actually get less sun, like the bottom of the foot, lower leg and

palms," Solomon said. "Skin cancer may also begin under a nail, around the anus or on the genitals. It's important to check these areas." Howard added, "If you're seeing something strange on your body, go get it checked out. You can never be too cautious."

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