

Dangers of Sunburn Tattoos

Written by Sara Goodwin



Every summer there's seems to be a new social media trend. They can range from charitable like last year's ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, to dangerous like getting sunburned...on purpose. This trend is circulating Instagram with #SunburnArt and #SunburnTattoo, and these so-called works of art are generally more dangerous than most normal sunburns. Want to find out why? Dr. Pablo Prichard, chief of plastic surgery at [HonorHealth John C. Lincoln Medical Center](#) and senior partner at [Advanced Aesthetic Associates](#) explains.

Getting a sunburn at all at any time in your life is dangerous—anytime your skin is exposed to the sun it increases the risk of skin cancer whether it be the generally non-lethal basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma or the highly deadly melanoma. What's most scary and dangerous about this trend is that people are going out in the sun without sunscreen on purpose. And they are staying in the sun longer to see the design better. These "tattoos" aren't as visible without a significant tan or burn, and the more sun exposure, the more risk of skin cancer.

Melanoma in particular is very sensitive to sunburns—having one blistering sunburn doubles a person's risk of melanoma. But even normal sunburns increase your risk of melanoma. "If you have five or more regular sunburns, non-blistering sunburns, that in and of itself doubles your risk for melanoma," Prichard says. And while many people think that looking tan is more attractive than looking pale, they may not appreciate the long-term effects, like how it ages the skin.

"Your skin is composed of the epidermis, which is the top layer of skin, and then you have the dermis, which is the deep layer of skin," Prichard says. "The more sun exposure you have to an area, you're actually killing off that dermis, or the deep layer of skin and making it thinner and thinner and thinner. The thinner that deep layer of skin is, the more you show wrinkles; the more you show skin irregularities; the more you show pigment irregularities...instead of having that supple, very elastic look to it, it has more of a kind of worn out, leathery look to it."

The healthiest way to get the bronze glow that so many people seek is through artificial tanning like spray tans or bronzers, which don't have an effect on skin.

If you do get sunburned however, Prichard has several tips you can follow on how to treat your skin.

- Immediately get out of the sun.
- Reduce the acidity of the environment by using baking soda ointment or aloe vera to help heal the skin.
- Keep your skin out of the sun until it's completely healed. And completely healed skin doesn't mean once the peeling has stopped, it means once the burned skin is the skin's natural color.
- If you have blistering, keep the area moist with ointments like Aquaphor. "If it scabs over, then that area won't heal nearly as nice and can cause some scarring eventually," Prichard says.

Living in Arizona, we are also subject to excessively strong sunrays and for that reason, Arizonans should take care of their skin a little differently than people from other parts of the country, and Prichard has two tips. The first is stay out of the sun as much as possible. This may seem obvious because can anyone really withstand the heat to tan outside right now? But when it does start to cool down, remember the UV rays are intense.

The second is to use a micronized zinc sunblock. Unlike most sunblocks that work through a chemical blockage, micronized zinc sunblock is a physical block and works immediately at reflecting UV rays once applied to the skin. "You want as much physical blockage of the UV rays as possible to your skin" Prichard says. "The other types of sunblocks, they are a chemical block to your skin. They rely on the ingredients to actually bind to your skin and that actually takes a long time, at least 30 minutes or so."

Rule of thumb: less sun exposure + less tan = less aging and less likelihood of skin cancer