



FACTS ABOUT  
**Albinism**

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# “What’s The Sun Got To With It” Albinism & Skin Care

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## WHAT'S THE SUN GOT TO DO WITH IT? Facts about skin care for African Americans with Albinism

The one question I am asked is "Why can't you just get a tan?" It is always the same thing. People telling me to go outside and get some sun. I am still surprised to hear this suggestion. As an individual with albinism I can say... we do not tan we burn! If we are not careful going outside can be a painful and dangerous experience. Even fair complexioned Caucasians and African Americans may sunburn easily. The ability to obtain a tan is based on the pigment each individual's body produces and the type. Generally to darken an individual must have a brown pigment base in order to develop the vainly desired dark complexion. More pink and yellow rather than brown pigment is present in the genetic code of persons with albinism. There are some interesting facts behind why persons with albinism just do not tan.

Everybody has heard about the so-called "healthy tan". Well there is no such thing as a "healthy tan" where sunlight and ultraviolet exposure are concerned. The fact is, a tan is the skin's defenses to protect the body from harmful overexposure to sunlight. For individuals to successfully tan without burning one must gradually build up exposure to the sun. Limiting exposure to the sun by timed increments will eventually produce the effect of the skin darkening. To obtain a so called "healthy tan" individuals must go through gradual exposure to the sun, otherwise one will develop sunburn. An abundance of this activity can result in skin cancer!

The body produces melanin, which is a pigment that is responsible for tanning. Melanin is produced as a result of the body's exposure to ultraviolet rays in sunlight. In fact, melanin is what absorbs the UV radiation in sunlight and protects the cells from UV damage. It takes time for the body to produce melanin that is why most people can not tan in one day. This information applies mostly to Caucasians. For People of Color melanin is produced on a constant basis. So the skin is always pigmented. Therefore, People of color have a lower rate of skin cancer because of this constant level pigmentation. The melanin protects them from the UV radiation.

What does this have to do with people affected by albinism? Our skin produces little to no melanin. "The chemical pathway that produces melanin can not process because an enzyme is missing. Therefore, persons with albinism have varying degrees of pigment in our skin, hair, and (irises) eyes. Most individuals with albinism do not tan! "The cells in our skin are not protected from the sun's ultraviolet radiation. If we spend too much time in the sun, we will sunburn.

When an individual develops sunburn what is really occurring is cellular damage from ultraviolet radiation. The effects of sunburn can range from a combination of redness, discoloration and moderate to severely painful skin and/or blisters on the skin. The body's response to the damage with increased blood flow to the skin in order to bring in cells to repair the damage. The extra blood in the skin causes the redness and the increase of the brown and yellow pigmented cells create the appearance of the skin darkening referred to as a tan.

## HOW SUNSCREEN WORKS:

Sunscreen works to block or absorb ultraviolet light. White zinc oxide cream blocks UV radiation. Other chemicals actually absorb UV like melanin, but be careful not to use too much of these chemicals if you have sensitive skin. The chemicals that absorb UV include:

- PABA (para-aminobenzoic acid)
- Benzophenones
- Anthranilates
- Apply 30 minutes before going out.
- SPF (Sun Protection Factor) No less than 15
- Only protects from UVB radiation

## FACTS:

- First and Second-degree burns can be sustained from sun exposure.
- Skin cancer usually appears in adulthood, but sun exposure and sunburns that occurred in childhood cause it.
- Malignant melanoma is the most deadly form of skin cancer
- Cataracts may result from exposing the eyes to years of protected sun exposure

## FIRST AID:

- Apply cool baths or cool compresses for 10 to 15 minutes several times a day.
- Baking soda in the water may help relieve the pain (small children may become easily chilled, so keep the water tepid).
- Apply a soothing lotion to the skin.
- Your physician may prescribe a steroid cream to treat severe sunburn
- An over the counter pain medication such as acetaminophen (Tylenol, for example) may be helpful (Note: aspirin should not be give to children)

## SYMPTOMS:

Symptoms may not appear for a few hours, and the full effect may not be obvious for 24 hours.

- Skin is red, tender and warm to the touch.
- Skin may be blistered and/or swollen
- Blistering may occur several days after exposure
- Severe reaction ( Sometimes called "sun poisoning") may include fever, chills, nausea, or rash
- The sunburned skin may peel several days after the sunburn

## DO NOT:

- Do not apply petroleum jelly, ointment or butter to the sunburn. They make the symptoms worse and do not allow air to assist in healing.
- Do not wash the burned skin with harsh soap.
- Do not use over the counter creams and sprays that may contain benzocaine. (Benzocaine often causes an allergic reaction, especially in children.)

## CALL IMMEDIATELY FOR ASSISTANCE IF:

- There are signs of shock such as faintness, dizziness, rapid pulse, rapid breathing, increased thirst, pale skin, clammy or cool skin.
- The person has eye pain
- There are symptoms such as nausea, fever chills or rash
- The sunburn is very severe and painful.