

How to Read the New Sunscreen Labels

Article date: June 17, 2013

Look closely at the sunscreen you buy this summer, and you may notice some different wording on the label. This is the first summer that the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA)'s new labeling requirements are in effect. The new rules affect products that carry an SPF (sun protection factor) number, including not only sunscreen, but also makeup, moisturizer, and lip balm. Taking the time to learn about the new labels can help you better protect your skin from sun damage that can cause premature aging and skin cancer.

What's new

- **“Broad spectrum” claims must be backed by testing.** The new rules will make it clear to consumers whether sunscreens are “broad spectrum,” meaning they protect against both UVB and UVA rays. All sunscreen products protect against UVB rays, which are the main cause of sunburn. But UVA rays also contribute to skin cancer and premature aging. Now, only products that pass a test can be labeled “broad spectrum.”
- **Low SPFs must include a warning.** Sunscreens with an SPF lower than 15 must now also include a warning. It reads: "Skin Cancer/Skin Aging Alert: Spending time in the sun increases your risk of skin cancer and early skin aging. This product has been shown only to help prevent sunburn, not skin cancer or early skin aging." This same warning must appear on sunscreens that are not broad spectrum.
- **“Water resistant” does not mean “waterproof.”** No sunscreens are waterproof or “sweatproof” and manufacturers are no longer allowed to claim that they are. If a product's front label makes claims of being water resistant, it must specify whether it lasts for 40 minutes or 80 minutes while swimming or sweating.
- **Products can't over-promise.** Sunscreens may not claim instant protection or protection for more than 2 hours without reapplying. They may not use the term “sunblock.”

Take these steps to stay sun-safe:

- **Use a broad spectrum sunscreen with SPF of at least 30.** Be sure to reapply at least every 2 hours, as well as after swimming or sweating.
- **Cover up.** When you are out in the sun, wear clothing and a wide-brimmed hat to protect as much skin as possible. Protect your eyes with sunglasses that block at least 99% of UV light.
- **Seek shade.** Limit your direct exposure to the sun, especially between the hours of 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., when UV rays are strongest.
- **Avoid tanning beds and sunlamps.** Both can cause serious long-term skin damage and contribute to skin cancer.