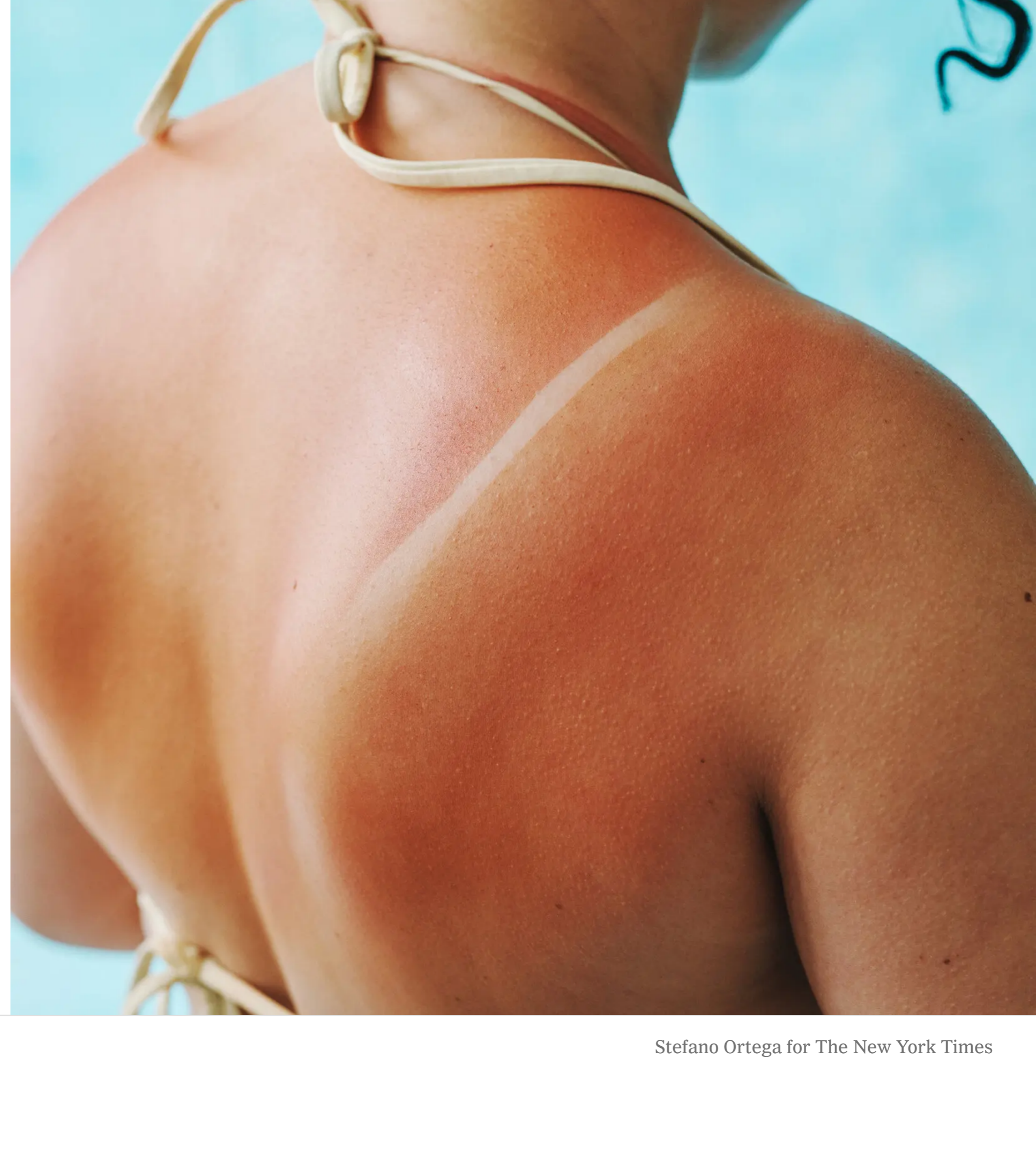


How to Soothe a Bad Sunburn

Experts recommend the best treatments for pain, peeling, blisters and swelling.



Stefano Ortega for The New York Times

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By **Dana G. Smith**

June 17, 2023

Oops. It's the first day of your beach vacation and you stayed out in the sun a little (or a lot) too long. Now your skin is paying the price and you're in need of some relief.

A sunburn is your skin cells' reaction to damage from the sun's ultraviolet radiation. In a first-degree sunburn, the top layer of skin, called the epidermis, is injured, resulting in redness, pain and swelling.

Second-degree sunburns are more severe because the next layer of skin, called the dermis, is also harmed. When this happens, blistering can occur because the epidermis and dermis become separated and inflammatory fluid floods in, causing the skin to bubble up.

On darker skin, sunburns are harder to notice at first because redness is less apparent. "Folks of color can also get sunburn, it just takes a lot more sun exposure for that to happen," said Dr. Adewole Adamson, a dermatologist and assistant professor of internal medicine at the University of Texas at Austin Dell Medical School.

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Sunburns also damage skin cells' DNA, which, over time, could lead to skin cancer. One blistering sunburn during childhood or five or more sunburns at any age doubles a person's [risk for melanoma](#), said Dr. Jesse Lewin, an associate professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai and a spokesman for the Skin Cancer Foundation.

Unfortunately, there's nothing you can do about the long-term harm a sunburn inflicts on your DNA, but there are remedies to soothe your skin in the short-term.



Stefano Ortega for The New York Times

Keep your skin (and yourself) hydrated.

It's important to drink lots of water when you have a sunburn because "the increased blood flow to your skin" can cause you to lose fluids, said Dr. Jennifer Holman, a dermatologist at U.S. Dermatology Partners in Texas and a spokeswoman for the American Academy of Dermatology.

For the skin itself, keep the burn cool and moisturized. Take a cool shower or bath or use chilled compresses on the area. But skip the ice packs because extreme cold could [further injure the skin](#).

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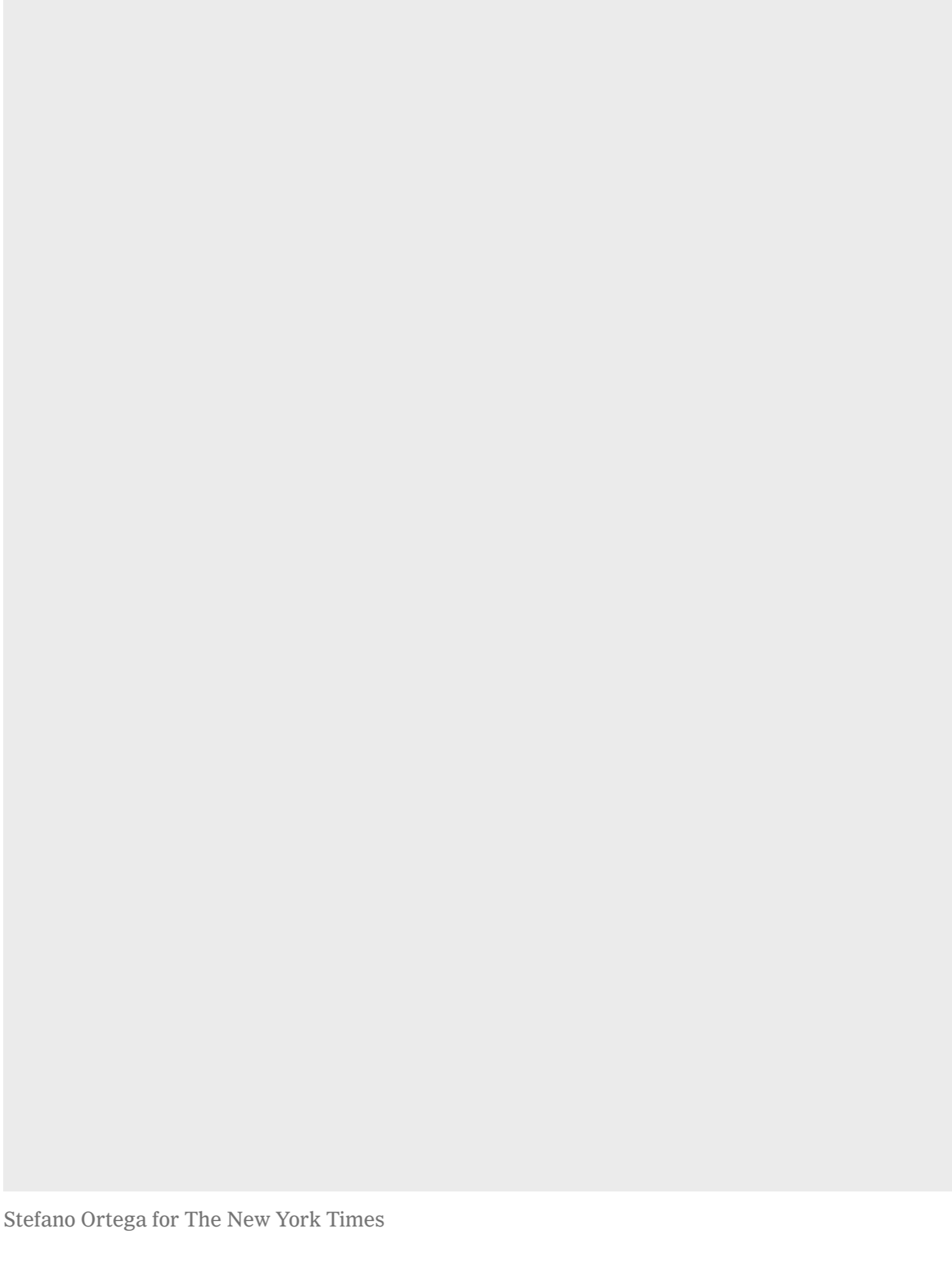
Next, apply a gentle moisturizer to the burn. The experts were divided on whether you should opt for a thick or thin lotion. Dr. Adamson and Dr. Holman recommended creams that contain ingredients like ceramides or petrolatum, which trap in moisture. However, Dr. Lewin cautioned that those thicker lotions could also trap in heat, and advised using a thinner, water-based option instead.

Aloe is often touted as a sunburn treatment, and the experts said it's also a good ingredient to look for because it's an effective moisturizer, but there's nothing unique about it when it comes to treating sunburns. Regardless of which kind of moisturizer you choose, the product should be fragrance-free and have a short ingredient list to avoid any potentially irritating additives.

If you're really uncomfortable, an over-the-counter anti-inflammatory pain reliever, like Advil or Motrin, can provide some relief and help alleviate any swelling. Stay away from topical pain relievers that contain lidocaine or benzocaine, though, because those can aggravate the skin.

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Be gentle with peeling skin and blisters.

If you have blistering, make sure to keep the area clean with soap and water. If the blisters are causing you a lot of discomfort, Dr. Adamson said it's OK to drain the fluid with a sterilized needle, but do not rip the blister off. Your skin is your first line of defense against bacteria and other pathogens, and exposing the tissue underneath can make you vulnerable to infection.

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Even if you don't have blistering, peeling can occur a few days after a burn, as that top layer of now-dead skin sloughs off. It's normal to want to assist the process, but be careful not to take off healthy skin. Any sign of bleeding means you've gone too far, and you're opening up an entrance for infection. Because of that risk, Dr. Holman recommends using a sharp pair of sterilized scissors to clip the dead edges instead.

Don't make it worse, and don't worry too much.

The vast majority of sunburns aren't acutely dangerous. The only times you might need to see a doctor are if you have a fever (because it could indicate heat stroke), or if a young child gets a severe sunburn (because they're at greater risk for dehydration).

As your skin heals, which typically takes about a week, make preventing another burn a high priority. That doesn't mean a sunburn has to ruin your vacation — just be extra careful when you go back outside.

Make sure you wear [sunscreen](#) with at least SPF 30 and reapply every two hours. Don a wide-brimmed hat and cover the burned area with [ultraviolet protective clothing](#). Stick to the shade when you can (an umbrella is your friend), and do your best to avoid the sun during the peak hours of 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Finally, try not to worry too much. A sunburn does increase your risk of skin cancer, "but it doesn't mean destiny," Dr. Adamson said. Fear of sunburns shouldn't "prevent people from doing healthy activities, like being outside."

The photos in this story, and the artificial sunburns, were styled by set designer Alice Martinelli.

Dana G. Smith is a reporter for the Well section, where she has written about everything from psychedelic therapy to exercise trends to Covid-19.

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