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SUN
What’s the damage?

A tan lasts a couple of weeks at best, but sun damage lasts a lifetime. Three readers had their skin analysed to discover the true extent of what the sun’s UV rays had done to them. The results shocked us all...
The sun worshipper

**KIM SWAED, 37**

Kim is from north London, works in PR and is married to James, 43. They have two sons, Ethan, 7, and Bailey, 4.

‘As a child I spent my summer holidays running about on the beach in Bournemouth, where my grandparents had a flat. I never burned, which Mum puts down to her obsessive reapplication of sun lotion – a habit that has stuck with me for life.

I love the sun. If it’s sunny at home, I’m out in the garden like a shot. And on holiday I’ll happily lie in full sun all day – it’s my idea of heaven.

But when I’m in the world, if the sun’s out, I always protect the skin on my face and body with SPF20 and reapply it regularly throughout the day – and I’m especially meticulous if I’ve been swimming.

I don’t like the shade (unlike my husband and sons who are always under a parasol), but it’s important for me to have the peace of mind that comes with knowing I’m well-protected if there’s a chance to catch a few rays. And, of course, as I get older, I’m now more conscious than ever about the ageing effects on the sun’s skin.

**THE RESULTS**

Kim’s constant use of sunscreen seems to have paid off. Despite spending the most time in the sun out of our three readers, she has the healthiest skin.

On a scale of 0 to 10 for UV damage, she scored 2, giving her a skin age of 30–35 – at least two years younger than her actual age.

‘Her type 3 (Mediterranean) skin tone, also stands her in good stead,’ says Dr Adam Friedmann, of the Harley Street Dermatology Clinic. ‘Higher levels of melatonin make darker skin less prone to UV damage and provide natural protection against skin cancer – which is predominantly a disease of fair-skinned people.

But, the scan reveals Kim still has a certain degree of sun damage, which could have been avoided if she’d opted for a higher factor sun block in the past.

‘Even for olive skin like Kim’s, I always recommend at least factor 30,’ says Dr Friedmann. ‘In the real world, we never apply it as thickly as scientists do in labs, making factor 30 more like a factor 1.5 on our skins. But, with or without an SPF, we dermatologists never recommend sustained sun exposure – 15 minutes a day is enough.’

**KIM’S VERDICT**

‘It’s a relief to find that years of sun worshipping haven’t done more damage, but I won’t get complacent. Seeing the scan has shocked me into using factor 50 this summer.’

**EMMA BARRETT, 41**

A charity worker, Emma lives in south London with her partner, Shelley, 39.

‘With reddish hair and freckly skin as white as skinned milk, I’ve had to avoid the sun all my life. Even with total sun block, I burn in ten minutes flat, so I never lie on a beach or by a pool.

And, as much as I’d love to have lunch outside in the sun, I always insist on sitting under the shade of an umbrella.

On occasions – and against my better judgement – friends have coaxed me out of my long sleeves and big hat, into the sun. But within minutes, I can feel my exposed skin prickling with heat, then a batch of new freckles appears and I have to dive indoors. I know from bitter experience that freckles are a warning sign that I’m about to burn.

This summer I’m off to Cyprus, where I’ll have to be ultra-careful. Last time I was there, I burned in the shade while wearing factor 50, so I really can’t take any risks. I’ll swim in a T-shirt, and reapply a high-factor cream the second I’m on dry land.

I used to envy friends with lovely tanned skin, but now I just think to myself: “You may be brown now, but I’ll have fewer wrinkles in the future.”

I hope this scan will prove me right.’

**THE RESULTS**

The palest skin is most susceptible to sun damage, which is why Emma scored 9 out of 10 for UV damage and a skin age of 50, despite religiously avoiding the sun. And, although her skin looks great now, the scan suggests she will start to see wrinkles in the next five to ten years.

‘Emma must try not to worry too much,’ says Dr Friedmann. ‘The face gets more sun than any other part of the body, so is bound to have suffered more damage than areas that have been covered by clothing.

As well as using a high SPF with a UVA star rating of at least 4, she might want to try a treatment to reduce the appearance of sun damage. A dermatologist can prescribe tretinoin (Retin-A), which speeds up exfoliation and collagen production, so that damaged skin is removed and healthier skin is encouraged to come through.

Acid peels, dermabrasion, cryotherapy or botulinum toxin can reduce the appearance of wrinkles. But none of them prevent future damage or reduce the risk of developing skin cancer.’

**EMMA’S VERDICT**

‘Wow! That’s a nasty shock. I thought I’d been so careful! I’ll be applying a high SPF/FUVA-rated cream every day, along with retinol (a non-prescription alternative to tretinoin). The therapist who did my scan also recommended deep peels, but for now at least, I’ll just try my best to grow old gracefully.’

**KAREN VENEES, 45**

A writer from Nottingham, Karen is married to James, 43. They have two daughters, Holly, 16, and Georgia, 15.

‘Growing up in the 70s, people thought you had to burn to get a tan, and peeling off your skin in sheets was the mark of a good holiday. I remember being on a French beach and my mum covering me in a sun cream which had been hanging around in the cupboard for years. I doubt it was effective, but we knew so little about the sun’s dangers.

Back then, every teenage girl wanted a tan. Despite having fair skin and mousey hair, I was determined to be a bronzed goddess. On holiday in Greece, when I was 19, I slathered myself in Ambre Solaire oil and spent the whole day by the pool. I burnt so badly, my skin blistered and I spent the next six days indoors, feeling very sick and sorry for myself. But I’m ashamed to say it took me some time to learn my lesson.

I finally came to my senses in my thirties when I went on more cultural adventures. I’ve been to Nepal, Cambodia and Thailand where, of course, the sun can be very strong. But I’m always well-covered up in a big hat, sunglasses and SPF 30 to 50.

**THE RESULTS**

Karen scored 3 out of 10 for UV damage, giving her a skin age of 40-45, and most of the damage was fairly old – probably dating back to her Greek ftasos.

‘The bad news is that the more dangerous type of skin cancer, malignant melanoma, tends to occur in people who had sunburn when they were young,’ says Dr Friedmann. ‘Exposure can’t change what has already happened. But, if you’ve burned, or you’ve had a mole check, you need to get your skin checked regularly.’

‘Every teenage girl wanted a tan. Despite the incidence of melanoma increase five-fold in the UK, with figures of around 13,000 new cases per year,’ says Dr Friedmann. ‘It’s thought that the package holiday industry and inadequate sunscreens during the 70s and 80s might have contributed.

Nowadays, sunscreens protect against not only the tanning rays – UVB, marked as SPF – but also against the other carcinogenic rays – UVA, marked as a 1-5 star rating in the UK.’

So choose a sunscreen with a 4-star UV rating, as well as a high SPF.

**KAREN’S VERDICT**

‘I can’t help feeling lucky that the harm I did during my reckless youth wasn’t more serious. I can’t turn back the clock, but I can rebalance my efforts to limit further sun damage in future.’

With thanks to Sk:n, Harley Street, London.