Sunless tanning products

Alice,

I was wondering if those sunless tanning lotions were good to use? How do they work?

Answer

Dear Reader,

There seems to be more of a desire to have that “back-from-the-beach” look without actually going to the beach! Although there currently aren’t any official regulations that define a product as a “sunless tanner,” the term usually refers to products that provide a tanned appearance without exposure to harmful ultraviolet (UV) radiation. Also known as self-tanning products, they’re available in a variety of preparations (lotions, creams, powders, sprays, gels, mousses, etc.) that can be used in at home to provide a temporary suntan when externally applied to the skin. When used as directed (more on that later), sunless tanning is generally an effective, safer, well-tolerated, and user-friendly alternative to soaking up those rays of sunshine.

Depending on the ingredients, some sunless tanning products can produce results almost immediately and some can even last up to a week. Products labeled as "bronzers" are a type of makeup product that can help to provide the illusion of tanned skin. Bronzers come in a variety of tones and preparations (e.g., powder, cream, lotion), and can be applied to the skin and then washed off like any other cosmetic. Sunless tanners that have more staying power likely contain dihydroxyacetone (DHA), which is the only color additive approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for use on human skin (when used as indicated). The chemical works by interacting with proteins on the outer layer of the skin to temporarily change the color (rather than sitting on top of your skin and camouflaging a person’s true skin color). Products with DHA provide a sunless tan that will fade more gradually than bronzers. Depending on the formula and application, a tan from DHA products can last approximately five days.

Unfortunately, even sunless tanning has its drawbacks. For example, some people may be sensitive or allergic to ingredients found in the product. To ensure that the skin isn’t exposed to any allergens, testing the product on a small section of skin before using it elsewhere on the body is recommended. During the test, if an uncomfortable reaction (itching, redness, tingling, swelling, etc.) develops, it’s wise not to use it any further. If any discomfort continues or is
particularly bothersome, consider talking with your health care provider about next steps. Additionally, sunless tanning products are for external use only, which means it’s not recommended for use near the eyes, nose, mouth, or any other mucous membranes. Lastly, sunless tanning pills, which are ingested, haven’t undergone FDA testing and haven’t been approved as a safe alternative to sunbathing or sunless tanning products.

If you’re interested in getting your tan on while staying safely in the shade by using these products, consider some of the following tips for the best results:

- Read the instructions on the product box or container carefully before use to minimize any complications that may result from its use.
- To avoid a streaky tan, you might want to set aside some down-time to shower and exfoliate your skin thoroughly before you apply your sunless tanner. This removes excess dead skin cells, which helps with achieving an even application and extending the life of your new tan.
- Once your skin is completely dry, it’s helpful to work the product into your skin in small sections at a time (rather than large areas) to ensure even coverage.
- To keep your fingers and palms from becoming overly tan, consider putting on disposable latex or plastic gloves before you start. Alternatively, you can wash your hands frequently between sections.
- You may also want to wipe off areas like your knees, elbows, ankles, and other joints, as they tend to absorb more of the sunless Tanner than the rest of your body.
- Finally, take some time to let the product dry completely, and wait at least ten minutes before getting dressed. You might also want to avoid wearing tight clothing that could rub away the product for the first few hours after application.

Dermatologists also warn that while some self-tanning products claim to have sun protection factor (SPF), it’s usually too small a dosage to effectively protect you against the sun’s UVA and UVB rays (and most products don’t contain any SPF at all!). Keep in mind that your newly acquired sunless tan won’t protect you from UV rays either. No matter your skin tone, it’s recommended that you apply a sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher every time you go outside to protect against sun damage and skin cancer. And it’s not just about that summer glow — don’t forget sunscreen on cloudy days and in the winter (when it might be easier to slack on sun protection!). Sunscreen, sunglasses, and protective clothing remain an essential part of any beauty and health routine — no matter how you got that glow!

Alice!
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