Peeling skin after using a tanning bed

Alice,

Last week, I was in a tanning bed, yes, I know I shouldn’t do this, and I was put in for too long. I was severely burnt. Now that the redness has gone away, my skin is peeling all over. I was wondering what you could suggest for me to put on my skin so the peeling is less visible or to help it out.

Answer

Dear Reader,

The post-sunburn peel you’re experiencing is your body’s way of getting rid of the top layer of skin that’s been damaged by ultraviolet (UV) rays. Unfortunately, once your skin is burned, it’s burned. While it may be part of the healing process, peeling skin can be an uncomfortable situation. There isn’t a treatment nor any course of action that can take away or cure a burn, and it’ll heal at its own pace. However, certain strategies may minimize your risk of infections, skin irritations, and discomfort while your skin peels.

- **Use skin moisturizer.** Because the burn has dried out your skin, choose a gel or lotion with aloe to help soothe your skin.
- **Stay hydrated.** Sunburns can be dehydrating since they draw fluids to the skin’s surface. This leaves less water for other parts of your body. Drinking extra water will help ensure that your body gets the water it needs.
- **Shower or take a bath intermittently.** Rather than every day, try every other day, so you don’t further dry out your skin.
- **Press a cool compress against your skin.** When you shower or bathe, make the water temperature cool. Sometimes, cool water can not only feel good but will also help to soak away excess flakes. When using the compress or towel, make sure you’re patting the skin, rather than rubbing it. This will help prevent irritation.
- **Avoid peeling or picking at your skin.** You increase your chances of getting an infection if you create open cuts or sores by peeling or picking. If skin is hanging, snip it off with clean, fine scissors so you don’t pull at skin that is still attached. Once you trim your skin (or it falls off), apply a thin layer of antibacterial cream or ointment to prevent infections.
- **Be sure not to pop or pick at any blisters.** If a blister does break, you can prevent
infections by cleaning the area with soap, applying antibiotic ointment, and covering the popped blister with a bandage.

- **Protect the skin while it heals.** If you’re outdoors, keeping your skin covered and limiting the amount of UV exposure your skin gets will prevent your skin from getting burned again while still healing.

Adapted from American Academy of Dermatology [2] and Mayo Clinic [3].

If you do get an infection from your sunburn and peeling skin, you may want to see a medical professional. Complications from severe sunburns can be best treated by a health care provider. Moving forward, if you’re still looking for a summer glow but want to avoid sunburns and peeling, you may want to consider using sunless tanning products. Not only do they provide the tan you’re looking for, they help prevent exposure to some of the health risks that come with tanning. The increased exposure to UV rays from indoor tanning can lead to an increased risk of skin cancer, skin aging, and changes in skin texture over time. For those times you'll still be exposed to UV rays (be it outdoors or in a tanning salon), you can minimize your risk by applying a broad-spectrum sunscreen or other product containing at least sun protection factor (SPF) 15.

Alice!
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