What's New
Under the Sun

Looking at the number on the bottle is not sufficient in determining a good sunscreen, says Fort Lauderdale dermatologist Barry "Galizter of Dermatologic Laser and Surgery Center. "You have to read the active ingredients."

Both UVB and UVA rays play a role in skin cancer and aging, according to South Miami dermatologist Debra Price.

"Up until very recently, we had no effective way to protect very well against the short-wave portion of UVA, except by using blocks like zinc oxide that were not always cosmetically appealing," she says.

Within the past year, however, the cosmetic industry has introduced products that have finally brought more complete protection, especially from UVA rays, which account for over 80 percent of skin damage, aging, DNA damage and skin cancer -- and can penetrate clouds and glass.
Because ingredients that block UVA and UVB rays have not, traditionally, been stable in combination, it has been difficult to find them in a single formulation, says Dr. Manjula Jegasothy of the Miami Skin Institute, until Neutrogena introduced its line of five sun protection products now found in pharmacies and mass retailers for less than $10. These include Ultrasheer Dry-Touch Sunblock and Age Shield Sunblock, with patented Helioplex technology, which stabilizes both protective ingredients. Prescribed Solutions, available only in dermatologists’ offices, offers a sunblock called Up the Ante with a stabilizing technology to protect against both UVA and UVB.

“Many people like Up the Ante because it has a little tint to it and enhances skin color just a little,” Price says.

Dermatologists also applaud the long-awaited approval of Mexoryl SX. Patented by L’Oreal, it protects widely against UVA, Price says. Used since the early 1990s in Europe and Australia, it is sold under the name Anthelios SX and is available in a formulation from La Roche Posay at CVS stores for less than $30, as well as in dermatologists’ offices. Aveeno has also now launched its own photostable UVA/UVB product, Continuous Protection, and Boston dermatologist Dr. Jeffrey Dover has launched Sun Effects with Dermplex, from his Skin Effects line, with products ranging from $7 to $30 at CVS stores.

While a number of products containing natural ingredients such as soy, caffeine, green tea, carotenoids and milk thistle have recently been touted for their sun protection, “there are not enough good studies yet to let us know whether these ingredients are effective,” says Mark Nestor, M.D., Ph.D, of Skin and Cancer Associates/Center for Cosmetic Enhancement in Aventura. “Some of the products with these ingredients probably do have some sun protection factor, but we just do not yet know the degree.”

Sunblock is the No. 1 anti-aging treatment, Nestor says, especially if it is a UVA block, and people with darker skin tones need sun protection just as much as those with fairer skin.

“People with darker skin tend to have more problems with hyperpigmentation, or darkening of the skin, from the sun,” he says.

While melanin does, to some degree, protect against skin cancer, skin cancer exists in people with darker skin, and sun damage, including wrinkleing, is just as prevalent.

“If you want to look good for your age, you need to watch your sun intake, regardless of your skin color,” Jegasothy says.

Also introduced in 2006 is a new supplement, capsules that are taken orally. It is not a replacement for sunscreen, but it does offer added protection against the damaging effects of sun exposure. Heliocare is an FDA-approved plant extract that comes from a fern, Jegasothy explains.

“It has been used in Europe for a number of years, and we know that it is very safe. Here in the U.S., it is being sold as an over-the-counter nutritional supplement at stores like GNC and at pharmacies.”

Heliocare affords an SPF of about 4 to 8 for 24 hours.

“I advise people who have a lot of skin damage or who have a history of skin cancer to take Heliocare in addition to using topical sunscreen when they are spending the day outside,” Jegasothy says.

The supplement costs about $1 a capsule, with a bottle of 60 usually running about $59.

The Remergent skin care line, available in dermatologists’ offices, contains topical repair enzymes (DNA Repair) that are also effective adjuncts in preventing sun damage and which have the capacity to reverse some sun damage, Price says. “Patients who have a lot of sun damage should consider using repair enzymes. I recommend using a sunscreen that protects against UVA and UVB along with DNA Repair.”

Although some experts have recently expressed concerns about Americans not getting enough sun to meet their vitamin D requirements as a result of wearing sunscreen, South Florida dermatologists disagree.

“While there is no doubt that we need vitamin D to be healthy, that amount of vitamin D can be achieved through supplements — calcium with vitamin D — or through diet. It is not necessary to age your skin and get skin cancer in order to try to lower your risk of other cancers,” Price explains.

Just as the number of improved sun protection products is increasing, so are the treatments for sun-ravaged skin. The most significant of these, Nestor says, is photodynamic therapy, or PDT. The procedure uses a special blue light in conjunction with a topical agent, a photosensitizer called

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Dr. Tamara Lior, Dr. Debra Price, Dr. Manjula Jegasothy, Dr. Mark Nestor
Levulan, a "smart" solution that is absorbed only by the abnormal or damaged cells.

"We carried out a study here that shows that PDT can reduce the incidence of future skin cancers by about 80 percent, even in people who have had many skin cancers," Price notes.

In addition, there are non-ablative (non-wounding or cutting) laser procedures that not only make people look better, but also remove some of the damage and reduce the chance of future skin cancers. These procedures work beneath the surface skin layer to improve skin texture and tone. They have mild side effects and offer a quick recovery for patients.

"The Fraxel laser," Price says, "treats microscopic columns of skin, sparing the skin in between. The advantage is that it is highly effective in improving sun-damaged skin without significant down time."

A lifeguard for eight years, Suzanne Borroso was looking for a treatment to even out her skin tone after her years in the sun and to diminish the beginning of fine facial lines.

"I wanted to even out the discoloration," the Kendall resident says, "but I didn’t want a dramatic treatment like full laser resurfacing, with all the down time."

Now, after each Fraxel laser treatment, she sees improvements in her skin. Barroso chose a conservative approach—one of the advantages of the Fraxel laser—to see how her skin tolerated the treatment.

Patients can undergo up to eight or 10 passes with the laser during a treatment. Barroso began with three, and has gradually increased the number of passes with each treatment.

The best part of the procedure?

"You’re not housebound after a treatment," she says. "I have even gone out to a brunch on the beach the next day—with the proper sunscreen, my hat and sunglasses, of course."

In addition to non-ablative laser treatments, devices like Thermage, and the newest, Titan, use radiofrequency to tighten and lift the skin, while IPL (intense pulsed light) devices produce a broad spectrum of light wave lengths to rejuvenate the skin and help with removal of blood vessels and brown spots.

"These devices do not work for everyone across the board," says Tamara Lior, a dermatologist with Cleveland Clinic Florida in Weston. "Some people respond better than others. However, the great benefit is that, like the non-ablative lasers, there is not much down time with these treatments."

The CO₂ laser remains the gold standard for full laser resurfacing, which removes areas of damaged or wrinkled skin layer by layer.

"It’s the only thing that really removes the deeper wrinkles and dark spots, but it has some definite down time involved, and it is not for everyone," Lior explains. "People with dark skin tones cannot use it because, over time, it can cause hypopigmentation, or reduction of pigment in the skin."

While the laser is not new, there is nothing yet that has taken its place, she says.

"We’re always looking for new modalities that will give little or no down time and the best effect. However, there is still nothing you can do to make a drastic difference without having down time."

With an increasing array of treatments from which to choose, how do we know that we are selecting the right one?

"There are a hundred new treatments out there every month," Jegasothy says, "but it is important not to jump on the bandwagon for the newest, hottest treatment. It is important to see a board-certified dermatologist or plastic surgeon who has evaluated all the studies on these treatments."