

Sunscreen decoder

What to buy and what to avoid in the sun-care aisle, according to dermatologists. **Ingrie Williams** reports

No other skin-care product is as challenging to shop for as a sunscreen. The expectation for an effortless experience (i.e. no white cast, stickiness or unpleasant smell) is high, and though the variety of offerings has expanded in recent years, that hasn't necessarily made the search easier. With limited opportunity to try before you buy, finding a formula that is pleasant to use, or won't irritate your skin, remains a case of trial and error.

"One of the most common reasons my patients report not using sunscreen is that it makes them look pasty or that it doesn't feel nice," says Dr. Danny Guo, a dermatologist and medical director of Rejuvenation Dermatology Clinic in Calgary. "This sounds vain and trivial, but it is an extremely important criteria when deciding on which sunscreen to buy. If you want it to do its job, it has to get on your skin."

Beyond preventing skin cancer, daily SPF use delivers big payoffs for any complexion. "I tell my patients that if you want to wrinkle, if you want thinner skin, or if you want spotted, discoloured skin, then don't wear sunscreen," says Dr. Renée A. Beach, owner of DermAtelier on Avenue and assistant professor, faculty of medicine at the University of Toronto. "It should be part of your everyday skin-care regimen. And we need to understand that it really is for everybody, not just people with fair skin or who burn easily."

There's no fool-proof method to finding the right one for you, but these pointers can help inform your sunscreen search.

WHAT TO AVOID

As the clean-beauty aisle has grown, sunscreens and the UV filters they rely on to protect skin have become more heavily scrutinized. Case in point: homosalate, a chemical UV filter which has generated controversy as a hormone disruptor. "I do not actively argue against certain sunscreen ingredients, such as homosalate, as much of the evidence is weak and the harm of scaring patients from sunscreen use can outweigh the potential harm that those ingredients can bring," says Guo. In this case, both dermatologists agree that more research is needed. "The data is mostly in animals at high, high levels. I can't say that it necessarily translates, or has real-life transferability, to our day-to-day use of the ingredient," says Beach.

Oxybenzone, on the other hand, is a UV filter worth watching out for, especially for those with reactive skin. "It has been associated as a contact allergen," says Beach. "If you have a history of sensitivity, eczema or documented allergic contact dermatitis, then that would be a sunscreen agent that I would say you can skip."

Fragrance is another ingredient that some would do best to avoid. "It's a common allergen but may not be a problem for most people," says Guo. "If you get a rash from using sunscreen, that's the first thing to try to cut out." Sometimes tricky to pinpoint on any skin-care label, ingredients such as citronellal and limonene are often used as fragrance additives. "The best thing is to find a product that says fragrance-free," says Beach.

Another no-no in sun care is retinol, a derivative of Vitamin A that's touted for its anti-aging benefits. "A sunscreen that contains any type of retinoid is, in general, not recommended," says Guo. "Retinoids are for nighttime use as they may not be stable in sunlight." Be on the lookout for the ingredient which can be listed in various forms, including retinal or retinyl.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

"Personally, I think mineral sunscreens are preferable to chemical sunscreens. Therefore, almost every sunscreen I recommend includes zinc oxide, titanium dioxide, or both," says Guo. Those mineral actives help protect by creating a shield on the skin's surface that reflect the sun's rays. Chemical sunscreens, on

NEW SUNSCREENS TO TRY

The one that's extra hydrating: Ingredients such as hyaluronic acid and squalane make this watery mineral liquid, that has a barely-there feel and invisible finish, ideal for dry skin. Vacation Shake Shake SPF 50 Mineral Milk, \$39, vacation.inc



The one with anti-aging ingredients: Try this weightless chemical formula that absorbs quickly and contains peptides to help diminish the look of fine lines, an uneven skin tone and dullness. Kiehl's Beyond Screen UV Serum SPF 50+, \$56, kiehls.ca



The one to help with hyperpigmentation: Available in three flexible tints, this fragrance-free sunscreen offers mineral protection with the benefits of iron oxide. Neutrogena Purescreen Mineral UV Tint Face Lotion SPF 30, \$21, neutrogena.ca



The one that's hands-free: Easy for on-the-go use, this hydrating balm stick comes with hyaluronic acid, niacinamide and squalane. Glow Recipe Watermelon Glow Niacinamide Dew Balm Sunscreen Stick SPF 45, \$41, sephora.com



The one for active days: A match for sensitive skin, a zinc oxide-based formula with shea-butter protects, soothes and is water- and sweat-resistant for up to 80 minutes. KOA Body Mineral Sunscreen SPF 30, \$58, livingkoa.com



The one that makes skin glow: New to Canada from an Australian brand, this alcohol-free lotion protects from UV and leaves behind a delicate coconut scent and subtle shimmer. Ultra Violete Extreme Hydrating Body + Hand SPF 50+, \$40.50, sephora.com



HOW TO SHOP LIKE A PRO

Performance markers

Alyssa Ages asks top female athletes to share what matters most when buying activewear

Prioritizing fashion over function is a risky proposition any time, but especially when it comes to workout attire.

Nike recently drew criticism from athletes for seemingly doing just that.

When the brand revealed its showpiece male and female outfits for track-and-field Olympians – featuring an ultra-high-cut swimsuit-style kit for the women – there was immediate backlash from female athletes.

"Women's kits should be in service to performance, mentally and physically," wrote American runner and coach Lauren Fleshman on Instagram. "If this outfit was truly beneficial to physical performance, men would wear it." (In a press release, the brand stated that the line was "the most athlete-informed, data-driven and visually unified the company has ever produced" and responded to the backlash by noting that the line includes nearly 50 styles, including some with shorts. Still, many athletes found it telling that Nike chose to highlight one of the more revealing options.)

With the global activewear market projected to reach US\$771.8-billion by 2032 (up from US\$425.5-billion in 2022) we have more choices than ever when it comes to finding workout clothing. This growth can have positive implications such as increasing the affordability of athletic apparel, making participation in sports more accessible for Canadians. But it may also mean fast-fashion brands rush items into stores to meet ever-shifting aesthetic trends without proper research and testing, leading to poor quality and product waste.

Choosing the right activewear for your body and sport can contribute to your overall enjoyment and increase the likelihood that you'll stick with it.

Here, four high-level athletes share what matters most when it comes to choosing the best activewear.



Carolyne Prevost
@ROGUEFITNESS

MATERIAL MATTERS

Be sure to select the right fabric for comfort, sweat-wicking properties and sustainability. "Some key traits I look for are support and breathability of the fabric," says Brandie Wilkerson, a two-time Olympic beach volleyball athlete. A quick way to know you're in a functional fabric is noticing "what feels immediately comfortable when you're standing there trying it on, because when you get active the fabric will be tensed and pulled in different directions so it has to work right away."

CrossFit Games athlete Carolyne Prevost similarly highlighted the importance of breathability in both her leggings and sports bras for high-intensity sports that leave you sweaty. That generally means avoiding pieces made with 100-per-cent cotton, as it absorbs moisture and dries slowly, making your clothes damp and heavy.

Some of the most functional athletic fabrics are also the most sustainable, including bamboo (moisture-wicking, sustainable, soft), and wool (breathable, moisture-wicking, great for outdoor and cold-weather activities). While most activewear materials, such as polyester, are made from plastic, some brands are now using recycled plastics as textiles, offering the same level of functionality with less environmental impact.

For professional cyclist and Olympic bronze medalist Catharine Pendrel, it's crucial to consider the best material for the season as well. "Summer is easy to dress for," she said. "But winter shoes and a versatile jacket are game changers for extending your season." For wetter seasons, look for items with a Gore-Tex coating, which increases water- and wind-proof quality.



Filsan Abdiaman
BRIAN MCCURDY

FINDING YOUR BEST FIT

For everyday exercisers, choosing pieces that fit well means you'll be more likely to enjoy your workout in the moment and stick with it. "When it comes to picking athletic apparel, especially for female athletes, the emphasis should always be on functionality and comfort," says Filsan Abdiaman, an ultrarunner and the founder of Project Love Run, a running club for wom-

en in Vancouver and Edmonton. "It's easy to get caught up in how something looks, but ultimately, the gear needs to support your body and keep you comfortable during your chosen activity."

Finding the right fit might mean heading to a bricks-and-mortar shop to try on items, or seeking out brands with flexible return policies.

Prevost likes to do a few exercise-specific movements, such as squats, when testing apparel in-store. With pants and shorts, "I make sure the material is stretchy but not see-through," she says. "I also may do a few movements to see whether the material is comfortable and if there is chafing that may occur. For tops, I try to feel the material to make sure it's nice and light, stretchy and breathable. I don't like too thick of a material for activities as it can be hot for working out."

It's also worth keeping in mind that vanity sizing and size inconsistency exists in activewear, too. "Last year I tried on a pair of shorts at a store and had to go up two sizes – not because of any physical changes to my body, but because the brand decided to make their sizes a smaller fit," says Abdiaman. "As someone who is in a small/thin straight-sized body, that was not a good look for the brand. ... What about all the folks in larger bodies that no longer have access to clothes in your brand?"



Catharine Pendrel
@CANADIANCYCLIST

SPORT-SPECIFIC FUNCTION

Just because a piece looks great doesn't mean it serves the needs of your chosen sport. A built-in-bra tank top might feel like enough support for a low-impact activity like yoga, but offer too little support for running. A pair of thin leggings might feel great on a brisk walk, but become too see-through at the bottom of a squat.

Strength athlete Prevost looks for leggings with pockets to stash a hunk of chalk as she shifts quickly from movement to movement, and tops with higher necklines "because when the barbell is at shoulder level, it can scrape around the collarbone area."

For cycling, Pendrel says saddle health is "key to a good cycling experience. Investing in a couple high-quality shorts with a good chamois and testing out saddles, or asking your girlfriends their recommendations, is well worth your time."

The quality of the chamois (the pad sewn into cycling shorts) can mean the difference between a great ride and a really uncomfortable one. For short rides, a thin chamois should provide enough comfort, while you'll want to look for a thicker one for long rides or multiday trips.

Think about how your body will be moving and find apparel that serves the needs of that activity.



Brandie Wilkerson
MELISSA TAIT/
THE GLOBE AND MAIL

DON'T NEGLECT THE ITEMS YOU CAN'T SEE

"If there's one piece of athletic apparel I can't live without," says Abdiaman, "it's definitely good-quality underwear. It might not be the first thing that comes to mind when you think of essential gear, but trust me, it makes a world of difference, especially in endurance sports. The right pair stays in place, provides support where you need it and prevents any unwanted rubbing or irritation."

Abdiaman notes that what feels and fits best will be different for every body, but she prefers "breathable, cotton underwear."

Sports bras and socks can similarly contribute to overall comfort (if you've ever worn socks that were either made of cotton or too loose-fitting for a run, you know the particular misery of mid-run blisters).

"For sports bras, I want to make sure I am well covered on the side and the front, and that as I run and move around, everything is staying still," says Prevost. She avoids low-cut sports bras and looks for thick straps that won't shift during high-intensity workouts.

Abdiaman suggests getting fitted when possible and keeping in mind that the support you need may differ from sport-to-sport.

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