

The Daily Gleaner

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By Valerie Hillier

Not All Sunscreens are Created Equal

I find it hard to understand why something that is supposed to protect us might be harming us in other ways. Not really a fair trade-off. This is what I thought when I recently read the Environmental Working Group's (EWG) new report on sunscreens.

For years I have searched for a sunscreen that protected me but did not cause skin irritation. I have fair and sensitive skin, so I am not much of a sun seeker, so I tend to spend more time in the shade or indoors on a hot sunny day. I burn quite easily and develop hot red rashes with some sun-care products and body lotions. So it is understandable that I became a little concerned last month when I received a copy of the Environmental Working Group (EWG) report on sunscreens.

The Environmental Working Group fills the void when governing bodies aren't willing to set substantial recommendations and regulations on sunscreen ingredients and their effectiveness. According to their newest report, zinc oxide and titanium dioxide are key ingredients that provide the most UV protection without any threats of toxicity.

Also well known for their SkinDeep Cosmetics Database, the EWG produces a report that is a compilation of industry, government (US), and academic data sources and models constructed over the past seven years, as well as a thorough review of the technical literature available for sunscreen. The document rates and compares 292 brands and 1700 products.

According to the EWG, mineral-based sunscreens lead the way in consumer safety and sun protection, and the report brings zinc oxide and titanium dioxide to the forefront of effective and safe sunscreen ingredients. While no sunscreen is perfect, these minerals offer broad UVA and UVB protection without threatening to decay beneath the sun's rays. With little risk of toxicity or skin penetration, the EWG hails these two ingredients as superior to the chemical concoctions most sunscreens tend to offer. The report states: "Unlike other common sunscreen chemicals, zinc and titanium are not allergenic, do not break down in sunlight and do not disrupt the body's natural hormones."

Gaps in both the regulations and the research have led consumers down a confusing path when it comes to differentiating between sunscreens. According to the EWG, three out of five sunscreens on the market are non-mineral, or chemically based. One out of five has combinations of mineral and non-mineral bases, and only one out of five sunscreens offers purely mineral-based protection.

The report states that most sunscreen brands avoid the evidence and use harmful chemicals such as Oxybenzone to fight the burn. The EWG's findings show that Oxybenzone is present in nearly 60 percent of sunscreens on the market. Studies have shown it can cause allergic reactions, readily absorb in the skin, and even find its way into breast milk!

Of course, the 'greenest' course of action to protect yourself from harmful UV rays this summer is to wear a hat and sunglasses; cover up – clothing is your best protection; and adhere to the old adage "everything in moderation", even the beautiful sunshine.

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I have only touched on a very small portion of this report, to see the Executive Summary and read the full report and review the database for ratings on suncare products go to <http://breakingnews.ewg.org/2011sunscreens/>

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