

59% of Americans worry about sunscreen chemicals. Only 32% understand how sunscreen works.

A national survey by Melanoma Research Alliance reveals a lack of understanding about sunscreen and skin cancer prevention.

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Many Americans think of sunscreen at the beach. Fewer consider wearing it for the drive there. And many are questioning if they should wear sunscreen at all.

These trends, uncovered in a new national survey from the nonprofit Melanoma Research Alliance (MRA), highlight a central challenge in skin cancer prevention.

Skin cancer is the most common form of cancer in the United States, according to the CDC. Nine in 10 skin cancers, including melanoma, are linked to exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation, according to the MRA. Reducing exposure to UV radiation lowers the risk of skin cancer, making sunscreen a key part of prevention.

A survey of 2,000 adults found that most Americans have a basic understanding of the risks of sun exposure, but that awareness doesn't always translate into action. More than 8 in 10 recognize that spending long hours in the sun contributes to melanoma risk, yet roughly one-quarter say they rarely or never use [sunscreen](#) when spending time outdoors.

Then there are those everyday moments that most people don't recognize as risky. The light coming through the window over the sink. The short walk from the parking lot. The hour in the bleachers with the sun hitting one side of your face. A single sunburn can be dangerous, but it's the accumulation of exposure over time that often drives risk.

Sunscreen is widely recognized as an effective tool for skin cancer prevention, yet confusion and misinformation persist, especially on social media. Fifty-three percent of respondents say they have seen claims that sunscreen ingredients may be harmful. Fifty-nine percent say they are concerned about what's in sunscreen, and 38% don't believe sunscreen is safe and effective.

Many Americans also say they aren't sure how sunscreen works. Only about a third can correctly explain the difference between types of sunscreens, while a much larger share reports being unsure.

Sunscreen works by absorbing or blocking UV radiation from reaching the skin, preventing DNA damage that can cause skin cancer. In the United States, the active ingredients in sunscreen undergo rigorous review by the Food and Drug Administration, which evaluates them as over-the-counter drugs. This drug-level standard requires extensive testing and contributes to a more limited set of approved UV filters compared with Europe, where sunscreens are regulated as cosmetics. The FDA is currently evaluating additional methodologies for assessing sunscreen ingredients, a process that could expand the number of approved UV filters available to U.S. consumers.

All of this is unfolding during a period of real progress in melanoma research. While melanoma remains the deadliest form of skin cancer, more than 8,500 Americans are expected to die from it in 2026, roughly one person every hour, [according to the American Cancer Society](#). Recent advances are improving outcomes for many patients with advanced disease, though approximately 50% of patients do not respond to current treatments, according to MRA, underscoring why prevention and early detection remain critical.

Survey methodology: The Melanoma Research Alliance commissioned Atomik Research to conduct an online survey of 2,000 U.S. adults between March 27 and April 1, 2026. The sample is nationally representative based on gender, age, and geography. Margin of error: ± 2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Atomik Research, part of 4media group, is a creative market research agency.

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