

# Sun-kissed or bottle-bronzed?

First the sunbed was blacklisted and self-tan potions became our saving grace, and now aesthetic physician Dr Anushka Reddy warns that not all self-tans are equal

## Is self-tan a safe alternative to tanning?

When you talk about sun tanning and safety, there are two critical elements at play: the first being an increased risk of skin cancer, and the second, hastened skin ageing from excessive sun damage.

In the first instance, self-tanning is by far a healthier alternative to excessive sun exposure and the increased risk of developing skin cancer. With regard to skin ageing, it makes for an interesting debate because, of course, you are slathering chemicals onto your skin that could be equally harmful in terms of visible ageing.

## How does self-tan work?

Let me change that question to "how does gold-standard self-tan work?", as safety is very close to my heart. In most instances, self-tans are available in sprays or lotions, or at professional salons. There is also an option of tanning pills, but beware: some contain the colour additive canthaxanthin, which is considered unsafe. When taken in large quantities, canthaxanthin can turn your skin orange or brown and cause hives, liver damage and impaired vision. The most effective self-tan

options contain dihydroxyacetone (DHA). This active ingredient is nothing more than a 3-carbon sugar that reacts with amino acids on the surface of the skin, causing a darkening effect. There is no danger in using DHA products as DHA only affects the outermost layer of the skin.

## Which ingredients should be avoided?

When you are using top-of-the-range, gold-standard self-tan products, the most common reactions are to the preservatives in the formulations. Be aware of them, as some self-tanners contain an excessively high concentration of toxic preservatives (parabens), fragrances that can irritate your skin or 1,4-dioxane, which is potentially carcinogenic.

You also need to be aware of the concentration of DHA in the product, but most over-the-counter products only contain between 3 and 5%. Earlier, I mentioned an ingredient called canthaxanthin, which should be avoided.

Any product containing oxybenzone should be avoided. This is a chemical sunscreen often included in self-tan lotions, but research suggests that it's unsafe for carcinogenic reasons.

## What effect do they have on your health?

Dermatitis is probably the most common side-effect, which is simply an allergic reaction to a preservative. Parabens should be avoided as they are easily absorbed and can affect hormone levels.

More sinister ingredients like 1,4-dioxane have been laboratory tested and found to increase the risk of cancer.

Remember, you should also take preventative measures to stop your self-tan product getting in your eyes or mouth.

## Can toxic ingredients be absorbed into your bloodstream?

Interestingly, the highest risk of ingredients being absorbed into your bloodstream involve DHA, but via inhalation. It's imperative to take precautions to avoid inhaling self-tan. Once inhaled, DHA enters the bloodstream and is known to cause DNA damage and possibly cancer.

## Is there a way to ensure that you use self-tan safely?

Simply take the time to read the labels carefully. Avoid all of the

above-mentioned ingredients, and be cautious when applying your self-tan.

There are many products on the market that are paraben-free; some offer plant oil fragrances over artificial fragrances to minimise potential harm, and some self-tan products are completely organic in their preparation, making them my personal favourites for safety.

## Are there any brands that you endorse?

No. With consistent improvement in the industry, I find it more helpful to my patients to discuss their specific needs and then recommend a latest-technology self-tan product. As I've mentioned before, I always err on the side of safety, and this is the best and safest option for my patients.

## Any tips on how to apply self-tan so it looks natural?

The first tip is to take your time. A rushed job will lead to blotching. I always suggest that you test a section of your skin for reactions and also to get some understanding of the colour.

## For a natural self-tan, follow these simple steps:

- Shower before and exfoliate your skin
- Dry off completely
- Moisturise any rough spots of skin. Remember, DHA works with these cells, so if you skip this step your result will appear darker in these areas (knees, elbows or any rough and dry skin areas)
- Wear gloves (you don't want tanned palms), and apply the lotion in a circular motion as evenly as possible, trying not to miss any areas
- Use self-tan sparingly on your face, but remember to apply it behind your ears and hairline for a natural effect
- Apply moisturiser to any areas that have darkened too much
- Wait at least 15 minutes. Don't get dressed for as long as possible, and wear loose clothes. I suggest no showers, baths or swimming for at least eight hours. **HI**

References available on request

