



Non-Essential vs Most Essential

“Ask Val” answers your urgent questions, Vol. 4

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A few curious readers had questions and comments about my [last post](#), so I’m answering them here. Keep the questions and comments coming, folks!

First, you, please, slipping your Visa card back into your wallet.

Q: That vitamin C serum you recommended? It was very expensive! What gives?

A: I should have warned you that a serum is often more expensive than other kinds of facial products. Why? It’s supposed to be more concentrated with active ingredients. Also, vitamin C serum requires special packaging (a dark bottle to keep out light) in order to stabilize its ingredients; you don’t want to buy an inexpensive product that’s packaged poorly. I also failed to mention why I personally don’t use a serum: I don’t spend a lot of money on non-prescription skincare. As I said, vitamin C serum has been shown to help reduce

oxidative damage—but how much help for how much damage on your actual face? It's one of those things I've decided I can do without. With the money I save, I might choose an in-office treatment instead. But if you like what a serum seems to be doing for your complexion—and if it makes you feel more secure about skin protection and you can afford it—why not? If you can't afford it, don't worry; just get a great sunscreen. Which leads me to...

You! Taking up three seats with a protective parasol, a straw bag, and wearing a straw hat (over that cute bucket hat), a upf50+ shirt, and...hey, wait a minute! Those leopard slides look familiar. Are you the same person who asked about age spots? I'm glad you're taking sun protection seriously. Oh, and I love the cheerful sunglasses. Your question, please?

Q: Seriously, what's the best sunscreen? Chemical, physical, mineral, vegetable? Is my SPF 30 moisturizer enough? What about sensitive skin? Can I use last year's tube? Help!

A: As you may have guessed, there's no such thing as a vegetable sunscreen (I googled it.) So I'll tackle chemical sunscreens first. Those have active ingredients such as avobenzene and oxybenzone that the skin absorbs and that convert ultraviolet light from the sun into heat, which (somehow) keeps UV rays from penetrating. If you want a fuller explanation, and other more detailed information about how sunscreen works, go [here](#).

Mineral (or physical) sunscreens like zinc oxide and titanium dioxide sit on the skin's surface and deflect UV rays. I think of this process as doing the exact opposite of what the aluminum reflector I used to hold under my chin was meant for when, as an idiot teen, I purposefully soaked up damaging rays in my backyard.

So, which to choose, chemical or mineral? Facial plastic surgeon [Michelle Yagoda](#), MD, believes chemical sunscreen is *not* a good option for those with sensitive skin, topical allergies, or for children under six months because the chemical reaction activated by the sun can cause irritation. She prefers mineral (physical) sunscreen; it causes less inflammation and gives better coverage with fewer ingredients. Mineral sunscreens tend to be more expensive (usually, the higher a formula's zinc concentration, the higher the price; a minimum of 7% zinc is recommended) but Yagoda believes they're worth it. Here's a good one.

As for your SPF 30 moisturizer, it *is* enough for a non-beach day...until you need to reapply after a few hours. Who likes reapplying moisturizer every few hours? Not me. That's why I love these brush-on sunscreens. Even though one of my life goals is to carry as little as is humanly possible, I always have one of these on me in warmer months. They're easy to apply, non-drippy, and compact—so terrific for traveling (whatever *that* is). What else? Oh, expiration dates. Sunscreens are required by the FDA to retain their original strength for three years. There should be an expiration date on the

product—but because you’re using sunscreen daily (and of course you are), that will probably wear off. Unsure about how old the product is? Toss it and buy another. Keep the new one away from excessive heat (in a glove compartment, for example) and, along with your face, out of the sun.

I don’t expect you need further encouragement to wear sunscreen. Still, three more things worth sharing. One, this startling statistic from the Skin Cancer Foundation: *Photo aging accounts for 90% of visible skin aging*. I take that to mean that if you never exposed yourself to the sun, your complexion would look something like the skin on your butt. (I encourage you to check out the skin on your bottom; you will likely realize a profoundly missed opportunity.)

Two: A few years ago, I discovered a small study that found daily use of broad-spectrum sun protection may also visibly *reverse* existing sun damage, including rough texture, lack of clarity, and hyperpigmentation. Cool, right?

Finally, if you care to read about my experience with basal cell skin cancer—and to see a photo several people advised me not to show in *O, The Oprah Magazine*—head here. It’s a cautionary tale.