

Men's Health

How Margaritas Can Give You a Sunburn

The summer cocktail can mess with your skin, even if you're not drinking

BY MARYGRACE TAYLOR, JULY 02, 2015



Pounding margaritas could come with a few consequences, like waking up with a sombrero-sized headache or doing your best Jimmy Buffett at the karaoke bar.

But here's a weird one to add to the list: developing second-degree burns.

That's what happened to a guy in Florida last month. The day after hanging out in his backyard squeezing limes for margaritas—as Florida men are wont to do—he developed burns and blisters on his hands and arms. When he headed to the ER, docs told him that the combo of citrus juice and sun exposure was the culprit.

The condition, called phytophotodermatitis, sounds like a freak thing. But it's actually more common than you might expect, especially in the summer when more people are mixing citrus-based cocktails at outdoor gatherings.

"Every year around the Fourth of July, we have someone come in with it," says dermatologist Delphine Lee, M.D., Ph.D., director of translational immunology at St. John's Health Center in Santa Monica, California. "And it can happen anywhere during times of peak sun exposure, not just in sunny states like Florida."

Phytophotodermatitis is basically a fancy name for a rash or burn caused by furanocoumarin, a chemical found in citrus fruits like lemons and limes that makes your skin more sensitive to the sun's harmful UV rays.

When you're out in the sun squeezing or mixing a citrusy drink, that chemical could get on your hands and make your skin more prone to developing burns, Dr. Lee says.

Like a sunburn, you won't really spot phytophotodermatitis until after the damage is already done. A few hours or even a day after being in the sun, you'll notice redness, irritation, or even painful blistering on the areas of your skin that were exposed to the citrus juice.

"The classic rash is shaped like the lime or lemon juice running down the person's arm," Lee says.

As the burn starts to heal, you'll be left with hyperpigmentation, or brown spots. The spots are harmless and painless, but they can last for weeks or even months.

See your doctor or dermatologist if you think you have the condition. He or she may prescribe an anti-inflammatory ointment, which will help ease discomfort or irritation and minimize the redness.

And depending on the severity of your burn, your doc might recommend other wound-care measures, like keeping the area covered or avoiding additional sun exposure. If your hyperpigmentation bothers you, you'll probably be told to pick up a skin-bleaching cream, too.

To prevent it from happening again, just stay out of the sun when you're dealing with citrus fruits, Dr. Lee advises. If you're mixing up drinks for a barbecue or outdoor party, hang out in the shade. (Wear rubber gloves for extra protection.)

And when you're done, wash your hands with soap and water ASAP.