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Is sun-protected clothing worth the hefty price



Southwest Floridians head to the beach daily, and some wear protective clothing meant to block the sun's harmful rays. But is the protection worth hefty price?

The clothing comes labeled with a UPF number, ultra-violet protection factor. Stores like Old Navy and Walmart sell the shirts.

Mom Elaine Doyle bought a 40+ UPF rated swim shirt from Old Navy for her son.

"He's fair skinned, so I don't want him burning, and he's so young," said Doyle. "I want to protect his skin from the sun. I look for anything 40 UPF or above. If you can get 50+ UPF, that's great, that's what I go for."

Preslee Stachurski also bought her 5-year-old daughter a similar rashguard.

"I went to a discount store and got the best brand I could find. This is Roxy," said Preslee Stachurski. The Rosy rashguards typically cost \$30, but Stachurski didn't want to spend that much.

Why are some of these t-shirts so pricey? We went to the University of Central Florida's College of Optics and Photonics to put these sun-smart shirts to the test.

"When the light hits the material, it has three choices. It either transmits through it, reflects, or absorbs," said Salimeh Tofighi, a research assistant at UCF's College of Optics and Photonics.

We brought four t-shirts with us and used their machines to measure the transmittance of UV light through each clothing sample.

The first shirt we tested was a Hanes Cool DRI long sleeve t-shirt from Walmart.com. It is 100 percent polyester and has a UPF rating of 50+, and it cost about \$10.

"As you can see, it transmits less than 3.73 percent of the light," said Tofighi.

That means when you're wearing the Walmart shirt, about 3.7 percent of the sun's harmful rays will hit your skin the rest of the rays will be absorbed by the shirt.

The second shirt we tested was a salt-water and chlorine resistant Suntect t-shirt from Coolibar.com. Coolibar weaves Zinc Oxide into a blend of cotton and viscose from bamboo fibers for what the website calls, "the ultimate cool, calm and comfortable protection." The shirt also had a UPF rating of 50+. Prices on the website ranged from \$30 to \$50.

"Between 0.6 percent to 0.9 percent light transmits through it, and hits the skin," said Tofighi.

The third shirt we tested came from Hanes.com. It was a polyester and cotton blend. It had a UPF rating of 40+, and it cost us about \$10.

"It's a little bit more than one percent," said Tofighi. "It's a little bit worse than the white one, but it is better than the blue one."

And last, we tested a red t-shirt that from a kickball tournament. It's made of cotton, it does not have a UPF rating, and it was free.

"It's between 1.49 percent and 1.53 percent," said Tofighi.

So while wearing the cotton t-shirt, about 1.5 percent of the sun's harmful rays will hit your skin.

Here are the rankings:

1. Coolibar

2. Hanes.com t-shirt
3. Free cotton t-shirt
4. Walmart shirt

But Tofighi said it's important to note that comparing the cotton t-shirt to the UPF rated clothing is like comparing apples to oranges.

Of course, a heavy cotton shirt or jacket will protect your skin from the sun's harmful rays, but it's not a practical choice in the hot weather.

The UPF rated clothing is lightweight, and most people said it's a lot more comfortable too.

"Sun protective clothing does work. The nice thing about putting on the UPF clothing is that you can use it as an alternative to the sunscreen. Some people don't want to buy the sunscreen," said Aurora Badia, M.D., D.O., a dermatologist at Florida Skin Center.

"A lot of patients ask me, is sun protective clothing a good alternative. And especially for people who are outside working all day, it's a great alternative to try to use the long sleeve shirts because it will protect them."

But according to our NBC2 test results, you don't need the most expensive UPF clothing to protect your skin.

"Hearing that just makes me think that I wasted my money," said Stachurski. "I could've sent my kids in a t-shirt over their bathing suits like I did when I was young. But again, when I was a kid and wore a t-shirt, it never felt comfortable, and my daughter asked to wear this [rashguard] today, so I guess that's just the proof, right?"

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