Dr. Whitney Bowe’s
Top Sunscreen Picks: 2020 edition

YOUR GUIDE TO HEALTHY, SUN-SAFE SKIN THIS SUMMER
There are 2 main categories of sunscreens: **physical** (or mineral blockers) and **chemical sunscreens**.
Physical/Mineral Blockers:

Physical blockers (also called mineral blockers), go by the names zinc oxide and titanium dioxide. Physical blockers can be more difficult to rub in—and they can sometimes leave a cast on skin, especially if you have skin of color. However, mineral SPFs have come a long way—some brand new ones blend beautifully into skin of all shades and colors.

When it comes to safety, the FDA considers physical/mineral blockers (zinc oxide and titanium dioxide) to be GRAS-- “generally recognized as safe.” These ingredients are not likely to be absorbed through the skin and into the bloodstream. With no other known concerns, the FDA gives these 2 ingredients a big thumbs up.

Chemical Blockers:

Chemical blockers -- like avobenzone, oxybenzone, octinoxate, octisalate -- work like a sponge. They absorb UV rays, and in the past were considered much easier to rub in.

From a safety standpoint, two ingredients stand out: oxybenzone and octinoxate. So what’s the deal with these chemical ingredients and why are they considered controversial?

First, we know that these chemical sunscreen ingredients can be absorbed through the skin, into the bloodstream. In fact, one study in JAMA dermatology showed that if you cover 75% of your body with a chemical sunscreen, and reapply that same amount every 2 hours all day long, the chemical ingredient levels can reach pretty significant numbers -- after just one day. We don’t know the effects that this absorption has on our health, but there are some studies suggesting that oxybenzone can impact the reproductive system. In some laboratory studies, oxybenzone appears to mimic the effects of estrogen.

There is also some concern surrounding both of these ingredients and how they might be harmful to coral reefs.
The words natural and organic are causing confusion.

When patients think of natural sunscreen ingredients, the ones they have in mind are zinc oxide and titanium dioxide. In contrast, sunscreens that contain chemical ingredients like avobenzone and oxybenzone are thought to be unnatural. So let’s first get our terms straight. There’s no such thing as natural sunscreen. Zinc oxide and titanium dioxide are considered physical blockers, or mineral blockers, and they primarily sit on the surface of the skin.

In fact, these physical blockers are usually synthetically made, not mined from the earth. Furthermore, most of the zinc and titanium are coated with other chemicals to make them more stable, easier to work with, or for other formulation reasons.

You can ignore the word “natural” on sunscreen labels, because that term doesn’t mean anything.
§ **Look for the words “broad spectrum”**
on the label, which means the sunscreen protects against both UVA and UVB rays.

§ **Look for an SPF over 30**
and reapply it every 2 hours to dry skin, or even more frequently if you get wet or sweat.

§ **Try to avoid sunscreens with oxybenzone or octinoxate**
on their ingredient list. That being said, there are some very safe and effective sunscreens on the market that contain both chemical and mineral ingredients.

§ **Sunscreen is NOT enough:**
make sure to also wear a wide brimmed hat, sunglasses and sun protective clothing like a rash guard or coverup. Look for “UPF 50+” on the fabric. Seek shade during peak sun hours and check the UV index.
Eleven by Venus Williams
Sunscreen Serum

This is one of my new favorite mineral sunscreens, made with 25% certified organic zinc oxide. I love the way it feels on my skin, and it is completely transparent, so it works for any skin tone. Many mineral sunscreens leave darker skin types looking white and chalky. This one uses something called Index Matching to camouflage the zinc particles so they blend seamlessly into the formula, basically making the zinc invisible. It also has prickly pear extract to add hydration without feeling greasy.

Skinbetter Sunbetter
Tone Smart SPF 68
Sunscreen Compact

This mineral sunscreen comes in a tone-adapting compact and provides just a hint of color. I dab this on with the round applicator sponge that comes on top of the compact, and I’m always so pleasantly surprised by the very subtle bronzing and blurring effect it has on my skin. It’s sort of a sunscreen, primer and bronzer all in one. It gives just a hint of color, which is perfect for days when I don’t feel like wearing makeup, but I do want a healthy looking glow and something that evens out and warms up my skin tone. The two active UV protective ingredients are zinc oxide and titanium dioxide, but they are delivered in a mineral matrix that reflects light in such a way that you don’t get that usual white cast from the minerals. The combination of iron oxides and plankton crystals act like a blue light shield, blocking blue light from entering the skin and creating free radical damage. It’s also non-comedogenic (I acknowledge that’s a controversial term!), so it’s a good option if you’ve been dealing with Maskne.
Thinksport Safe Sunscreen
EveryDay Face - SPF 30

The newest launch by Thinksport, it’s one of the best tinted mineral sunscreens I’ve ever tried on my face. Many mineral sunscreens dry out my skin, but this one boasts a combination of superpower hydrators including hyaluronic acid, organic olive oil, organic jojoba oil, and organic sunflower oil. The UV protection comes from zinc oxide, and they use a patent pending process to ensure even and effective coverage so there are no gaps. This translates into no white clumps in the formula, and no sunburns or holes in your UV coverage. The formula gives a nice tint on those days when you don’t feel like wearing makeup, but also works really well under makeup if you want to use it as a primer with built in SPF. It’s considered “clean” by Target’s standards, and clean is becoming more and more important to many people these days. It’s not just about efficacy, but people are equally concerned with ingredient safety both for ourselves and the environment. This one checks off all those boxes. I have had the pleasure of communicating directly with the CEO of this brand and I have been incredibly impressed by his transparency and commitment to developing the safest and most effective products in this space.

Think Baby Lotion SPF 50+

I love this mineral-only sunscreen for myself and my daughter. It has a delicious papaya fragrance and absorbs quickly into my skin without leaving any cast. I’ve put it to the test for several summers now, and it never fails to prevent a burn, even on the sunniest days.
SuperGoop! Unseen Sunscreen SPF 40

I really like this one for oily skin, or for underneath makeup if you like to layer your sunscreen under foundation. It has a nice, velvety matte finish and has as very lightweight feeling on the skin. It has no film and no noticeable scent as well. Love that the company reformulated without octinoxate to make it reef-safe. Heads up, it does contain chemical ingredients, so for those who want mineral only formula, this isn’t the right fit for you.

Biossance Squalane Zinc Sheer Mineral Sunscreen SPF 30 PA+++  

I love that this mineral sunscreen is also made with squalane, which is one of my favorite ingredients that locks in moisture and hydrates skin without clogging pores.
**La Roche Posay Anthelios Melt In Milk Sunscreen SPF 60**

This is the NEW version of my old favorite, which topped the Consumer Reports list year after year. La Roche Posay decided to remove the controversial ingredient, oxybenzone, in this updated formulation. It’s great for dry skin. I’m pleased to see so many new sunscreens launching without controversial ingredients like oxybenzone, but it really says something when a huge brand with a best-selling, top ranked formula takes steps to reformulate in a safer way. Consumers have become very vocal about their concerns, and companies, big and small, are listening. I love seeing this shift towards clean beauty and only hope to see a stronger emphasis on clean products moving forward with stricter standards and sustainably sourced, healthy ingredients.

**Kinship Self Reflect Probiotic Moisturizing Sunscreen SPF 32**

This lightweight mineral sunscreen uses micronized zinc oxide and contains turmeric, which has anti-inflammatory properties, along with a Lactobacillus ferment that helps support a healthy microbiome. It’s reef safe, cruelty free and 30% of the tube is made using PCR, or post-consumer recycled plastic.