Burning for Bronze

Why the industry's most enduring summer aspiration is built on bad science.

By BANI SACHAR



IMAGE: COURTESY GETTY IMAGES

Tanning is that rare beauty trend that has managed to stay relevant despite decades of scientific evidence against it. This summer, social media once again became obsessed with the 'holiday glow'. TikTok and Instagram feeds alike were flooded with tanning routines, SPF oils promising the perfect bronze, and vlogs where coming home several shades darker was treated as proof of a holiday well spent. Suddenly, bronzed is aspirational. But somewhere along the way, we've confused celebrating naturally brown skin with intentionally damaging it.

'The tan' has become shorthand for looking healthy and rested. Dermatologists, however, see something else entirely. "There is no such thing as a healthy tan," says Dr Geetika Mittal Gupta, MD and Founder, Isaac Luxe. "A tan develops when UV rays trigger the skin to produce more melanin in response to cellular DNA damage. Melanin helps limit further injury, but it cannot undo the damage that has already occurred." In other words, a tan isn't a sign of health. It's your skin mounting a defence. That distinction matters even more for Indian skin because UV damage doesn't always announce itself dramatically. Unlike lighter skin tones that often turn reddish or peel after excessive sun exposure, Indian skin is more likely to respond with pigmentation, uneven tone, and premature ageing. The absence of a burn often creates the illusion that nothing harmful has happened. "There is some truth in the belief that deeper skin tones are naturally better protected," explains Dr Madhuri Agarwal, dermatologist and Founder, Yavana Aesthetics Clinic. "Melanin does absorb ultraviolet rays, but compared with the SPF 30 or 50 we recommend for daily use, that protection is limited. Many Indian patients assume they've never burned, so they're immune. But sunburn and UV damage are not the same." It's one of the biggest misconceptions dermatologists continue to battle. Patients often don't connect persistent pigmentation, dullness, or fine lines with years of accumulated UV exposure because there was never a dramatic sunburn to signal the damage in the first place. Agarwal says many patients only notice the consequences years later, after countless commutes, beach holidays, and afternoons spent beside windows. "Without a visible sunburn as a warning, people often underestimate how much UV exposure their skin has absorbed."

The no tanning myth has proved as stubborn as the idea of the 'base tan'—the belief that deliberately tanning before a holiday somehow protects your skin from burning later. It doesn't. "There is essentially no scientific basis for the idea," says Dr Jaishree Sharad, board-certified dermatologist. At best, she explains, a base tan offers protection roughly equivalent to SPF 2 to 4—far below what dermatologists recommend. More importantly, "a tan is itself a sign of UV-induced skin damage, not a protective adaptation you should rely on." The same logic applies to another increasingly popular category: tanning oils. Marketed to intensify the bronzed effect, many work by encouraging greater UV exposure while making skin appear shinier. Even formulations containing SPF aren't designed to make tanning 'safe'. As Gupta puts it, "Sunscreen is a protective measure, not permission to tan." Even when wearing SPF correctly, skin can still tan if enough UV reaches it to stimulate melanin production. "That means some amount of damage has already occurred." Ironically, the renewed obsession with tanning comes at a time when skincare has never been more sophisticated. We're religiously applying vitamin C serums, investing in retinoids, booking pigmentation lasers, and chasing glass skin—only to spend entire holidays intentionally undoing much of that work. "It undermines more than most people realise," says Agarwal. "Vitamin C and retinoids help support cell turnover and protect against oxidative stress while deliberate tanning does the opposite. It's like moving two steps forward with your serums and then three steps back after a beach holiday." That's a contradiction professionals witness every summer.

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At The White Door India, Founder Sana Dhanani says clients routinely return from holidays with dry, dehydrated skin, tanning, and new pigmentation concerns. "Pigmentation, uneven skin tone and dehydration are just the result of the same," she explains, pointing to prolonged UV exposure combined with travel stress, disrupted routines, and dehydration. Even more telling is what happens next. Many of those same clients then seek treatments to reverse the very damage they intentionally pursued. "I think the common belief is that damage can always be reversed," says Dhanani. "It doesn't change the fundamental truth that sun damage is cumulative, and some of it is permanent." That doesn't mean the bronzed aesthetic itself has to disappear. The look has become less about changing skin colour and more about enhancing warmth, dimension, and luminosity. Make-up artists have long known that cream bronzers, bronzing drops, and body illuminators can create the illusion of a week in the Mediterranean without exposing skin to ultraviolet radiation. Professional spray tans and self-tanners offer another option, delivering colour through dihydroxyacetone (DHA), a sugar-derived ingredient that reacts only with the skin's outermost dead cells rather than triggering UV damage.

The irony is that beauty has finally reached a place where brown skin is celebrated rather than lightened. We no longer need to chase fairness. But we also don't need to chase UV damage in the name of looking "sun-kissed." Because the science has remained remarkably consistent, even as trends have changed. As Sharad puts it, "There isn't a truly safe tanning window... any tanning means UV-induced skin damage." The healthiest glow, it turns out, isn't one earned under the sun. It's the one that lets your skin keep thriving long after summer ends. ■