

self tanner

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Self-Tanner

Products that colour the skin without UV exposure. Sunless tanning is the one unambiguously good answer in this whole section: **it produces the appearance people want with none of the DNA damage**, and it works by a reaction that has been understood for seventy years.

The Maillard reaction, on skin

Dihydroxyacetone (DHA) is a simple three-carbon sugar. Applied to skin, it reacts with **amino acids in the keratin of the stratum corneum** in a **Maillard reaction** — the same non-enzymatic browning that colours toast, roast meat and beer — producing brown polymers called **melanoidins**.

Four consequences follow directly:

1. **The colour develops over two to eight hours**, because the reaction takes time.
2. **It affects only the dead outer layer**, so nothing penetrates to living tissue.
3. **It fades in five to seven days** as that layer sheds — the natural desquamation cycle.
4. **It provides essentially no sun protection**. A DHA tan has an SPF of roughly 3 at most. **Sunscreen is still required**.

Erythrulose is a related sugar used alongside DHA; it develops more slowly and gives a less orange tone, and blends of the two are common.

Getting an even result

Self-tan failure is entirely an application problem, and the fixes are known:

1. **Exfoliate the day before**, not immediately before — see [Body Scrub](#). Use an oil-free scrub; residue blocks the DHA.
2. **Shave or wax 24 hours before**, not after.
3. **Moisturise the dry patches** — knees, elbows, ankles, knuckles, heels. These absorb more DHA and go darkest.
4. **Use a mitt**. Palms take colour instantly and are the classic giveaway.
5. **Long sweeping strokes**, then buff outward at the wrists, ankles and hairline.
6. **Let it dry fully** before dressing; wear loose dark clothing.
7. **Wait the stated time before showering**, then avoid long hot baths, swimming and heavy exfoliation.
8. **Moisturise daily** afterwards — the tan lasts as long as the surface layer does.

Colour guides — the temporary tint in most products — show where you have been and wash off. They are the reason a modern self-tan is far easier than one from twenty years ago.

Where it sits in the rules

Cosmetic in the US — FDA primary category **(15) suntan preparations** — and DHA is regulated as a **colour additive**, which is the important part.

DHA is approved for external application to the human body only. FDA states explicitly that it is **not approved for application to the area of the eye, the lips, or mucous membranes**, and that its safety has not been established for exposure of those areas — a restriction that matters most for [Spray Tan Solution](#) booths.

A self-tanner with **no sunscreen** and any suntanning positioning must carry the **21 CFR 740.19 warning** that it does not protect against sunburn.

In the EU, DHA is permitted in cosmetics; the SCCS has assessed it for both self-tanning products and spray applications, with conditions of use.

Two practical notes

- **It stains**. Towels, sheets, light clothing and bathroom grout. Use dark towels and rinse the shower.
- **It has a smell**. The Maillard reaction produces characteristic volatile by-products, and no fragrance fully covers it. It is strongest at four to six hours.

Shelf life

Six to twelve months after opening, and **DHA is genuinely unstable** — it degrades faster in heat and at the wrong pH, and degraded DHA gives a weaker and more orange result.

Store it cool and dark, not in a bathroom and not in a beach bag. A product that has darkened in the

bottle, thinned or developed a strong off smell has degraded and will give an uneven, orange result.

Related

- [Sun and Tanning](#) — the shelf this sits on, and the rest of it.
- [Cosmetics](#) — what the label is legally allowed to say, and the full catalogue.
- The rest of *Sunless* — [Self-Tanning Mousse](#) · [Self-Tanning Drops](#) · [Gradual Tanning Lotion](#) · [Tanning Water](#) · [Spray Tan Solution](#) · [Tan Remover](#).
- [Leg Makeup](#) — the wash-off alternative.
- Regulatory statements here follow the FDA and EU sources listed on [Cosmetics](#), read 16 August 2026.