

What is “Margarita Disease”?

Sunshine and fresh fruit sound like a recipe for a fun summer. But beware: that combination can cause a severe skin condition with painful blisters and scarring.

Phytophotodermatitis, also known as “lime burn” or “margarita disease”, is a reaction caused by the sun’s UV rays activating a chemical, called furanocoumarin. Limes and lemons contain high amounts of furanocoumarin, hence the nicknames. The chemical also is found in mangoes, carrots, celery, parsley, figs and some wild plants.

“Phytophotodermatitis can cause skin cells to rupture and fluid pockets to form under the skin,” says Dr. Vivek Iyengar a dermatologist on staff at Advocate South Suburban Hospital in Hazel Crest, Ill. “It feels like a mild to severe sunburn, and can leave a discolored scar than can last for months.”

Even small amounts of lime juice in the presence of sunlight can trigger the reaction, he warns.

Dr. Iyengar explains that your skin may not show symptoms for 24 – 48 hours after exposure. When blisters appear, do not break them, he advises. This can cause infection and permanent scarring. Instead, he recommends visiting a primary care doctor or a dermatologist right away.

In some cases, Dr. Iyengar adds, the blistering never occurs, but the patient may notice dark spots or streaking on the areas of the skin that may have been exposed.

Anyone who handles limes or other high-furanocoumarin foods outdoors is at risk. The danger is higher during the summer because people spend more time outside, and the sun produces stronger UV rays.

To avoid contracting phytophotodermatitis, says Dr. Iyengar, wash your hands well after handling citrus fruits. Use gloves if you must handle many of them. Also, be sure to apply sunscreen, which blocks certain UV rays.

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Wishing you joy and good health,

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