mystery science

Grades K-5
Mini-Lesson: “Can animals get a sunburn?”

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

Hi, it's Doug! So it seems like at least once a year I get a bad sunburn because I forget to wear sun protection.

I recently found out that someone named Julia has a really interesting question about sunburns. Let's give her a call now.

[Video Call]
- Hi, Doug!
- Hi, Julia!
- I have a question for you. Can animals get a sunburn?
- That's a great question.

If a person is outside in the sun for too long, we can get a sunburn. Now, that said, some people seem to burn more easily than others. Sunburns are most noticeable on people who have light or pale-colored skin, and the thing about getting a sunburn is that not only does it hurt, but it can actually be dangerous for your skin. Even if you have darker-colored skin, you can still get harmed from being in the sun too long. This is why you'll hear doctors say that everyone should wear sun protection, whether that means wearing a wide-brimmed hat or using sunscreen.

But what about animals? Animals are outside all the time, so wouldn't they get sunburned?

Well, if we think about it, animals covered in fur or feathers don't get sunburned. Their skin is underneath the fur or feathers, so it's protected from the sun. But what about animals that don't have a lot of fur or feathers to protect their skin? Animals like elephants and pigs, rhinoceroses, or even a sheep with a haircut—can these animals get sunburned?

Before I say anything more, what do you think?

Now would be a good time to pause the video and discuss.

Okay. You ready?

If you ever get the chance, watch elephants on a hot, sunny day. Sometimes you'll see them doing this. It looks like they're just having fun playing in the mud, but they're actually doing something really important. All that mud acts like sunscreen. It's blocking the sun's light from burning the elephant's skin.

It turns out animals that don't have something to protect their skin can get a sunburn, like this poor pig here which didn't cover itself in mud. These animals usually try to cover themselves in something—something to act as a sunscreen. And that doesn't always have to be mud. Like this seal here has covered itself in sand.

But the weirdest case of all has to be this, the hippo. This hippo looks like it's been injured. As you look at that, you might think, "Is that blood?" But that is not blood. It's actually a type of oil that the hippo sweats. It's this red liquid that blocks sunlight, acting like sunscreen. So a hippo's body can create its own sunscreen.

In summary, animals that don't have a lot of fur or feathers can get a sunburn, and so if they're going to be in the sun, they have to find something to cover their skin with.

That's all for this week's question. Thanks, Julia, for asking it!