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By **JENNIFER GOULD KEIL**

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**CALL** it sun scream.

After years of slathering our skin with lotions to protect us from the sun's cancer-causing rays, along comes word that it could all be a hoax.

Sunscreen may even be more dangerous than going bare because it lures us into a false sense of solar security.

So says a lawsuit by two U.S. firms against some of the biggest names in the \$455 million-a-year sunscreen and tanning lotion business - including Coppertone, Hawaiian Tropic, Banana Boat, Neutrogena and Bullfrog. "Sunscreens misrepresent themselves in two big ways. They say they are waterproof, but they're not, and many say they are sun blocks, but nothing completely blocks the sun," says Sam Rudman, a partner in the Long Island law office of Lerach Coughlin Stoia Geller Rudman & Robbins, which launched the suit with Abraham Fruchter & Twersky, a Manhattan firm.

The lawsuit - a compilation of nine earlier complaints against sunscreen makers - is now up for class-action status in Los Angeles Superior Court. "We're seeking injunctive relief; an order from the Court to fix the marketing, labeling and advertising of the products; and restitution for people who bought products that were misrepresented," says Rudman, who calls sunscreen "the snake oil of the 21st century." The suit also alleges sunscreens promising "all-day protection" are lying.

Other examples of misrepresentation, says lawyer Mitch Twersky, include Coppertone WaterBabies, which claims on its label that it has "Instant Waterproof Protection, UVA/UVB Sunblock lotion 45 SPF" and that it provides "45 times your child's natural sun protection."

But the 45 SPF only applies to UVB rays - largely responsible for sunburn - not the deeper-penetrating UVA rays, which cause most tans but also wrinkles and other harmful effects. The product is also not waterproof, nor does it block the sun, Twersky says. And no sunscreen provides "instant" protection - they all need at least an hour to sink into skin before their screening powers kick in.

In response, the sunscreen companies say they are following the labeling rules of the Food and Drug Administration.

Dr. Albert Lefkovits, a Park Avenue dermatologist and assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, agrees sunscreen can never fully block the sun.

In addition, he says that U.S. sunscreens give numbered protection for blocking burning rays (UVB) but not for blocking tanning rays (UVA). In Europe, he says, both numbers are labeled on sunscreen products. In general, he says, an SPF 15 sunscreen will give only 15 minutes of protection, while SPF 30 sunscreen will give you 30 minutes of protection.

Some dermatologists, however, also believe sunscreens prevent the body from manufacturing vitamin D, which the body needs and is believed to have some anti-cancer and anti-aging qualities. While this theory has yet to be proven, doctors also say you can get your vitamin D fill from other sources, like milk, and that sunscreen is still a tool in the fight against skin cancer.

"Just remember that they are screens - filters - not absolute blockers. You can't put a sunscreen on at noon in Florida and not expect any damage," Lefkovits says.

"Sunscreens are protective, but you have to use common sense. Too much sun exposure can cause skin cancer," he adds.