

## SUN PROTECTION IN AUSTRALIA

The Cancer Council Victoria recommends that everyone living in Australia use a combination of measures to protect themselves from ultraviolet (UV) radiation including spending less time in the sun during peak UV radiation times, seeking shade, covering up with clothing, hats and sunglasses and using sunscreen. People should check their skin regularly for signs of skin cancer and seek medical assistance if they have any concerns.

### Ultraviolet radiation and skin cancer

- Australia has the highest rate of skin cancer in the world and over 1300 Australians die each year from the disease. Skin cancer costs the health system over \$300 million annually<sup>1</sup> and 1 in 2 people living in Australia will develop skin cancer during their lifetime.
- Skin cancer is mostly caused by overexposure to UV radiation<sup>2</sup>. UV radiation comes directly from the sun, but is also scattered and reflected by surfaces such as buildings, concrete, sand, snow and water. UV radiation is invisible; it is not warm and can pass through light cloud, so sunburn can occur on cool, cloudy days. UV radiation is most intense in Victoria during September to April, from 10am to 2pm (11am to 3pm during daylight saving).
- People of all skin types and of all ages need to protect their skin from the sun to reduce the risk of skin cancer. Protecting children and teenagers is particularly important. They have very sensitive skin and the more sun exposure in childhood, the greater the risk of developing skin cancer in later life. The earlier skin cancer is detected and treated the better the outcome. Therefore it is important to check skin regularly for suspected skin cancers.

### Spend less time in the sun when UV radiation is highest

- Spend less time in direct sunlight when UV radiation is most intense (10am to 2pm; 11am to 3pm during daylight saving). Plan outdoor activities outside these hours if possible.

### Make use of shade

- When outdoors, try to stay in the shade. If there is no natural shade, take portable shade such as a sun dome or an umbrella. Remember, even in the shade, UV radiation can reflect from surfaces such as water, sand and concrete. For best protection, choose shade that has extensive overhead or side cover and is away from highly reflective surfaces.

### Wear protective clothing and hats

- Wear clothing that protects the neck, arms and legs, and a hat or scarf to cover the head and ears and to shade the face. Choose clothing made of fabric rated above UPF (ultraviolet protection factor) 30. Loose fitting, closely woven clothes provide the best protection and are cool when the weather is hot.

### Wear sunglasses

- Sunglasses reduce the risk of short-term damage and irritation to eyes from UV radiation, as well as long-term diseases such as cataracts<sup>3</sup>. Sunglasses that meet the Australian Standard and are marked EPF (eye protection factor) 10 offer the best protection. The Australian Standard only measures how much UV radiation is transmitted through the lens, so choose close fitting, wrap-around glasses.

### **Apply sunscreen**

- Sunscreen works by filtering out UV radiation from reaching the skin. The SPF (sun protection factor) rating of a sunscreen cannot readily be translated into the 'strength' of a product. How long a person will take to burn depends on the time of day, the time of the year, the amount of reflected UV radiation, how cloudy it is and their skin type.
- Because sunscreen cannot completely shield the skin from UV radiation, it should not be considered the first choice for skin protection. Nor should it be used as a means of extending time in the sun. SPF 30+, broad spectrum, water resistant sunscreen offers the best protection.
- Apply sunscreen generously—one teaspoonful for the face, neck and ears and one teaspoonful for each arm or leg not covered by clothing. Apply 20 minutes before going outdoors and reapply every two hours or more often if it has been wiped, rubbed or sweated off<sup>4</sup>.

### **Substances that increase sensitivity to UV radiation**

- A number of medications can increase susceptibility to skin damage from UV radiation. These include some antibiotics, drugs for high blood pressure, antidepressants, some medication for skin conditions, drugs that suppress the immune system (as used after organ transplants) and non-steroidal anti-inflammatories. Check with a doctor about prescribed medicines, and take extra sun protection precautions if taking such medication.
- Some people develop photosensitivity to UV radiation as a result of contact with certain substances such as coal tar, dyes, chlorinated hydrocarbons and some plants. Photosensitivity is an abnormal reaction in the skin or eyes and extra precautions should be taken if exposure to these substances is a possibility.

### **Vitamin D concerns**

- Maintaining normal vitamin D levels only requires one to two hours of sunlight per week. Most Australians receive sufficient vitamin D through incidental sun exposure during their day-to-day activities. However, some groups are at risk of vitamin D deficiency through lack of sun on their skin and may need to take dietary supplements. These groups include women with dark skin who wear veils and elderly or disabled people who are in institutional care or housebound. If concerned, seek a doctor's advice.

### **Checking for skin cancer**

- Checking skin regularly can help detect any new or unusual spots that may be skin cancers. Check the whole body as skin cancer can occur in places not normally exposed to the sun. Be on the look out for any new spots, or existing spots that have changed colour, size or shape. A skin cancer may be a spot that bleeds easily, never heals properly or is always itchy.
- If an unusual spot is identified or change in an existing spot is noticed, show this to a doctor. Almost all skin cancers can be treated successfully if noticed early. Ignoring a strange looking spot can be dangerous as most skin cancers continue to grow if left untreated.

### **Further information and resources**

- For more advice on sun protection or skin cancer see a doctor, a community health worker, or call the Cancer Helpline on 13 11 20.
- Further information is also available on the SunSmart website at [www.sunsmart.com.au](http://www.sunsmart.com.au).

## References

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- 1 The Cancer Council Australia, *National Cancer Prevention Policy 2004–2007*.
- 2 Armstrong BK, Kricger A and English DR. Sun exposure and skin cancer. *Australasian Journal of Dermatology* 1997; 38(Supp), S1–S6.
- 3 Cains S. Royal Australian College of Ophthalmologists policy statement on sunglasses *Medical Journal of Australia* 1992; 157: 343–4.
- 4 Marks R. The use of sunscreens in the prevention of skin cancer. *Cancer Forum* 1996; 20: 211-215.