

## Skin Cancer – are you giving your employees the right advice?



UK winters are cold, dark, damp and seemingly endless and there are few of us who don't welcome the onset of summer. At the first sign of sunlight breaking through the clouds many of us spend our recreational time outdoors; exposing skin that has been under wraps for months to often deceptively powerful sunlight. The temptation to strip off in the heat is particularly strong amongst outdoor manual workers and a deep tan has almost become standard attire amongst this section of the workforce.

Despite several public-awareness campaigns over the past decade it seems that many people are still failing to acknowledge the risks associated with acquiring a tan and cases of skin cancer are increasing. Many believe that it is safe to have a tan provided it has been built up gradually and that only intense, short-term exposure leading to sunburn poses a danger. This is not the case. Most skin cancers are caused by DNA damage within the skin from the sun's ultraviolet rays and a tan, however it has been acquired, is a sign that the skin has been damaged; it will speed up the ageing process, make skin more leathery, mottled and wrinkled and, most seriously, increase the chance of developing skin cancer. UV radiation should be considered an occupational hazard for all those who work outdoors.

However, is complacency solely to blame for the rising number of skin cancer deaths? New research has indicated that incidences of skin cancer are also on the rise amongst those who **do** use sunscreen. There appears to be several reasons as to why we are not getting the levels of protection from sun creams that we expect:

Recent research has shown that the vast majority of people are not using anywhere near the right amount of sunscreen as they should. Manufacturers are now being blamed for failing to make it clear on product packaging just how much sunscreen should be used for each application. Studies have shown there is a big difference between the amount of sun cream that manufacturers use when performing laboratory tests on their products and the amount that people actually apply. The average adult needs to use about one-sixth of a standard sized bottle of sun screen to cover their body. Using less than this reduces protection disproportionately – half the recommended amount will give just a third of the level of SPF protection shown.

Additionally studies have shown that sun screen users frequently neglect to apply the product to areas such as the ears and parts of the neck – areas that are highly exposed and at a high risk of burning.

Sun cream must be reapplied regularly in order to continue to provide the SPF protection stated. However, research has shown that sun cream users are failing to reapply frequently enough – if at all. An Australian study found that reapplication increases total protection by 2-3 times compared to a single application. Another study found that reapplying sun cream 20 minutes after going outside provides up to 85% more protection than reapplying after two hours.

In tests for *Which?* Magazine some sun creams from leading high street retailers were found to offer lower levels of protection than the SPF stated on the packaging – in some cases significantly lower. Many products only protect against UVB damage (the main cause of sunburn) but not UVA, or, at best, have little UVA protection. However UVA rays are thought to be equally, if not more, significant in causing skin cancer – a fact often not made clear on product packaging.

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Skin cancer remains one of the most common cancers in the UK, with over 75,000 new cases diagnosed each year. As the number of sufferers continues to grow (the number of cases have increased almost five times in males, and have more than tripled in females over the last 25 years) so too does the debate regarding the best advice to stay safe in the sun. In view of recent findings, doubt has been cast over the adequacy of protection offered by sun creams and, whilst they undoubtedly have a role to play, emphasis is increasingly being placed on advice to **cover up and stay in the shade**.

If you are an employer of outdoor workers you should include sun protection advice in your health and safety training. Under Section 2(1) of the Health and Safety at Work, etc Act 1974 employers must ensure their employees can work safely, and without risk to their health – this includes unprotected exposure to UV radiation. Section 2 also makes it clear that employers should provide “information, instruction, training and supervision as is necessary to ensure, so far as is reasonable practicable, the health and safety at work of his employees”. This means that employers are legally bound to inform their employees of the dangers of spending time in the sun.

Encourage workers to keep covered up during the summer months – particularly at mid-day when the sun is at its hottest and when most workers take a lunch break. Clothing fabrics should be tight-woven. Encourage workers to use sunscreen of at least SPF 30 on those areas of skin which cannot be covered (one which protects against **both** UVA and UVB rays) and provide this free of charge (section 9 of the Act prohibits employers from charging for products, such as sunscreens or protective clothing) – whilst the individual worker makes the ultimate decision as to whether to use sunscreen, if it is freely available compliance is more likely. Ensure your workers know how much sunscreen they should be applying... and reapplying. Provide a shaded rest area outdoors and locate water points within these rest areas, encouraging workers to drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration. Consider including sun care as part of your health and safety rules.

Under the legislation, employees are duty-bound to cooperate with health and safety measures taken by their employer – including UV-protection policies. The benefits of compliance include fewer absence days through sunburn, a healthier and better-informed workforce, and reduced risk to employees of skin cancer from long-term sun exposure.

The HSE’s sun protection code recommends the following:

- Keep your top on. Clothing forms a barrier to the sun’s harmful rays – especially tightly woven fabrics.
- Wear a hat with a brim or a flap that covers the ears and the back of the neck – these areas can easily get sunburnt.
- Stay in the shade whenever possible, during your breaks and especially at lunch time.
- Use a high factor sunscreen of at least SPF15\* on any exposed skin. Apply as directed on the product.
- Drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration.
- Check your skin regularly for any unusual moles or spots. See a doctor promptly if you find anything that is changing in shape, size or colour, itching or bleeding.

*\*The British Association of Dermatologists recommends SPF 30 as the minimum protection for outdoor workers.*

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As well as the short-term risk of sunburn, which can potentially cause blistering and peeling of the skin, and the long-term risk of developing skin cancer, it is worth noting that some medicines, contact with certain chemicals that may be used in the workplace and contact with some plants can make skin more sensitive to sunlight. If any of these circumstances applies to the nature of your work extra protective measures may be necessary.

Whilst everyone is at risk of developing skin cancer, some people are more vulnerable than others. In particular people with fair or freckled skin that doesn't tan, or goes red or burns before it tans or those with red or fair hair and light coloured eyes. Additionally, individuals with a large amount of moles should take extra care and be vigilant to any changes in the size or appearance of their moles. People of Afro-Caribbean or Asian origin, whilst at a low risk, should still take care in the sun to avoid damage to eyes and skin, and to avoid dehydrating.

Early detection of skin cancer is the key to successful treatment – **don't delay**. If you think something might be wrong get it looked at quickly.

The British Association of Dermatologists has created the following ABCD-Easy rules to show you a few changes that might indicate a 'melanoma', which is the deadliest form of skin cancer.

As skin cancers vary, you should tell your doctor about any changes to your skin, even if they are not similar to those mentioned here:

**A**symmetry – the two halves of the area may differ in shape.

**B**order – the edges of the area may be irregular or blurred, and sometimes show notches.

**C**olour – this may be uneven. Different shade of black, brown and pink may be seen.

**D**iameter – most melanomas are at least 6mm in diameter. Report any change in size, shape or diameter to your doctor.

**E**xpert – if in doubt, check it out! If your GP is concerned about your skin, make sure you see a Consultant Dermatologist, the most expert person to diagnose a skin cancer. Your GP can refer you via the NHS.

More information on sun protection is available on the British Association of Dermatologists' website as part of their Sun Awareness campaign [www.bad.org.uk/public/cancer](http://www.bad.org.uk/public/cancer) or Cancer Research UK [www.sunsmart.org.uk](http://www.sunsmart.org.uk) or from the Health and Safety Executive [www.hse.gov.uk](http://www.hse.gov.uk)

Research information sourced from [www.whichmagazine.co.uk](http://www.whichmagazine.co.uk) and [www.bbc.co.uk/theoneshow](http://www.bbc.co.uk/theoneshow)

