

Sun protection and skin cancer prevention

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Skin cancer is Australia's most common cancer. Protecting your skin from exposure to the sun is important at every age and can help reduce your skin cancer risk.

OUR MOST COMMON CANCER

In Australia, the lifetime risk of developing any skin cancer is 70% for men and 58% for women. 'Sunspots' (known as actinic keratoses) affect more than half of all Australians aged over 40 years, and are commonly found on areas of the body that are often exposed to the sun, such as the face, hands and the forearms. Sunspots are precancerous lesions and may sometimes develop into skin cancers. This means that if you have sunspots you may be at higher risk of developing skin cancer. It is therefore important to make sure your skin is protected from too much exposure to the sun.

SUNLIGHT CAN DAMAGE SKIN CELLS AND WEAKEN SKIN IMMUNITY

Exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation in sunlight is the main cause of skin cancer. UV radiation causes skin cancer in two main ways:

- it damages skin cells (specifically by damaging the DNA in skin cells)
- it weakens the skin's immune defences, allowing cancer cells to grow unchecked.

There are two main types of UV radiation – UVA and UVB. Although it is the UVB radiation that is responsible for sunburn, both types can cause skin cancer. The damaging effects of UV radiation can occur even with very low amounts of sun exposure.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF AGAINST HARMFUL SUN EXPOSURE

1. Seek shade and wear sun-protective clothing

Keeping in the shade and wearing sun-protective clothing and hats is essential and will help you avoid overexposure to the sun. However, because a large proportion of UV radiation reaching the skin is diffuse (scattered and reflected) rather than direct, taking cover in the shade tends to give only limited protection (a UV sun protection factor [SPF] of less than 5). Hats cannot fully protect your lower face from UV radiation, so it is important to apply sunscreen to the face. Apply it also to any other exposed skin.

This handout provides information and tips on how to protect your skin from sun exposure and therefore reduce the risk of skin cancer.



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2. Look after your eyes

The eyelids and the skin around the eyes are common sites for skin cancer. Eye protection, with wraparound UV-filtering sunglasses, is important for reducing the risk of skin cancer as well as helping to prevent eye conditions such as pterygia and cataracts.

3. Wear high-SPF broadspectrum sunscreens

Sunscreens, especially broadspectrum formulations that reduce exposure to UVA radiation as well as UVB radiation, can protect against damage to your skin's DNA and its immune system, helping to reduce the risk of developing sunspots and, more seriously, skin cancer.

Products offering a higher SPF (i.e. a higher level of UVB protection) will provide greater protection against sun exposure than those with lower SPFs. It is important to remember, however, that the SPF number is not a reliable indicator of the duration in hours of 'safe' sun exposure. The 'real life' SPF of sunscreens tends to be less than half of the labelled (laboratory-measured) SPF. This is mostly because people tend to apply much less sunscreen in practice than was used to determine the SPF in laboratory sunscreen testing. Sunscreen should be used to reduce overall UV exposure, rather than to excessively prolong time spent in the sun.

Daily use of sunscreen helps protect the skin's immune defences, and can reduce the numbers of new sunspots developing by about 40% within just a few months. The number of people affected with new cases of skin cancers can also be reduced by regular sunscreen use. Year-round, daily use of a high SPF, broadspectrum (UVA and UVB) sunscreen on the face is essential for all people with sunspots and for all those who are at high risk of developing skin cancer.

REMEMBER, SUN PROTECTION IS IMPORTANT AT EVERY AGE

You can reduce the number of sunspots and your risk of skin cancer at any age simply by adopting good sun protection measures, such as those outlined above.

For more information, visit the Cancer Council Australia online at www.cancer.org.au or call their helpline on 13 11 20.

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A wide-brimmed hat, long gloves, a long-sleeve top and long pants are recommended when gardening in the sun.



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