
Skin cancer - children

Summary

- Protecting your child from overexposure to the sun's UV can reduce their risk of developing skin and eye damage and skin cancer later in life.
 - Check the daily sun protection times and use a combination of the five sun protection steps – slip, slop, slap, seek and slide – for all outdoor activities during these times.
 - Encourage your child, whatever their age, to be SunSmart.
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Protecting a child from sunburn and long-term overexposure to the sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays reduces their risk of developing skin cancer later in life. Encourage your child or teenager to be SunSmart and use a combination of sun protection measures: slip on sun protective clothing, slop on SPF30 or higher sunscreen, slap on a broad-brimmed hat, seek shade and slide on sunglasses.

UV damage accumulated during childhood and adolescence is strongly associated with an increased risk of skin cancer in later life. Australia has one of the highest rates of skin cancer in the world.

Two in three Australians will develop some form of skin cancer before 70 years of age. Every additional decade of overexposure to UV further increases the risk of melanoma, so increased use of sun protection at any age will help reduce the risk of melanoma.

Skin cancer and children

Too much UV can cause sunburn, skin and eye damage, and skin cancer. Infants and toddlers (up to four years of age) are particularly vulnerable to skin changes caused by UV radiation. This is because they have lower levels of melanin and a thinner outermost layer of skin.

Around 25 per cent of lifetime sun exposure occurs during a person's first two decades of life. A Queensland study found UV exposure during a person's first 18 years of life was the most critical for cancer-causing skin damage and skin aging.

UV radiation

We can see sunlight and feel heat (infrared radiation), but we cannot see or feel UV radiation.

UV radiation comes directly from the sun. It can also be scattered in the air and reflected by surfaces such as buildings, concrete, sand, water and snow. UV radiation can also pass through light cloud cover.

Don't just wait for hot and sunny days to use sun protection – UV can still be damaging even on cool, cloudy days. Whenever UV levels reach 3 or higher, use a combination of sun protection measures (hats, clothing, sunscreen, shade and, if practical, sunglasses).

Every day, the Bureau of Meteorology forecasts the sun protection times – the times of day UV levels are forecast to reach 3 or higher. At these levels, sun protection is recommended for all skin types. In Victoria, UV levels regularly reach 3 or higher from mid-August to the end of April.

Find the daily sun protection times for your location on the free **SunSmart app**, online at sunsmart.com.au or at the **Bureau of Meteorology**. There is also a free SunSmart widget available on the SunSmart website.

Check the sun protection times each day and use a combination of the five sun protection steps during those times.

5 sun protection steps

During the sun protection times, remember to use a combination of five sun protection measures – slip, slop, slap, seek and slide.

1. Slip on covering clothing

Use cool, loose-fitting clothing to cover as much of your child's skin as you can. If possible, choose fabrics that contain full percentages or blends of heavyweight natural fibres. These include cotton, linen and hemp or lightweight synthetics such as polyester, nylon, Lycra and polypropylene. The tighter the fabric structure, whether knitted or woven, the better the sun protection.

2. Slop on SPF30 or higher broad-spectrum, water-resistant sunscreen

Some tips when using sunscreen with children include:

- Apply sunscreen to your child about 20 minutes before they go outside.
- Apply sunscreen to all parts of your child's body not covered by hats or clothing.
- From around three years of age, encourage your child to start to apply their own sunscreen (under supervision) to help develop independent skills ready for preschool and school. Try applying a dot of sunscreen to each cheek, nose and chin and squiggles of sunscreen to parts of the arms and legs not covered with clothing and teach children how to spread this carefully to cover the skin.
- Reapply sunscreen every **two** hours, regardless of what the label says.
- Never use sunscreen as the only form of sun protection or to prolong the amount of time you or your child spends out in the sun, as it does not offer complete protection.
- Store sunscreen under 30°C and only use sunscreen within the expiry date.

When considering sunscreen for babies, remember:

- A baby's skin is sensitive and can burn easily.
- If babies are kept out of the sun or well protected from UV by clothing, hats and shade, then sunscreen need only be used occasionally on very small areas of a baby's skin.
- The use of sunscreen on babies under six months old is not recommended.
- When using sunscreen, choose one that is suitable for babies such as a sensitive or toddler sunscreen. These are just as protective, but much gentler on their skin. Sensitive and toddler sunscreens usually use reflecting ingredients such as zinc oxide and avoid ingredients and preservatives that may cause reactions in young skin.
- If you are concerned about reactions to sunscreen, Cancer Council recommends performing a 'usage test' before applying a new sunscreen. Put a small amount of the product on the inside of a baby's forearm for a few days to check if their skin reacts, before applying it to the rest of their body.
- While the usage test may show whether the skin is sensitive to an ingredient in the sunscreen, it may not always indicate an allergy, as this may also occur after repeated use of the product.
- If you observe any unusual reaction, stop using the sunscreen immediately and seek medical attention for the child.
- Professional assessment and testing by a dermatologist may be useful in identifying the ingredient in the sunscreen that is causing the reaction

3. Slap on a sun protective hat

To help protect the neck, ears, temples, face and nose, children should wear a broad-brimmed, legionnaire or bucket style hat. Remember that:

- Baseball caps and visors are not recommended – they offer little protection to the cheeks, ears and neck.
- Choose a style that can be adjusted at the crown or has a strap with a safety snap to avoid any possible choking hazards.
- Wearing a hat with a brim that shades the eyes can also reduce UV radiation to the eyes by 50 per cent.

Recommended brim width measurements

	Indicative age group	Headwear size	Broad-brimmed <i>minimum</i> brim width	Bucket style <i>minimum</i> brim width
Children	Infants: 00 – 1 year	41 cm–43 cm	5 cm	5 cm
	Toddler: 1 – 2 years	49 cm–52 cm	5 cm	5 cm
	3 – 8 years	50 cm–54 cm	5 cm	5 cm
	8 – 12 years	55 cm–57 cm	6 cm	6 cm
Adults	S/M	55 cm–57 cm	7.5 cm	6 cm
	M/L	57 cm–59 cm	7.5 cm	6 cm
	L/XL	59 cm–61 cm	7.5 cm	6 cm
	XXL	62 cm–63 cm	7.5 cm	6 cm

4. Seek shade

Try to use shade to protect your child whenever possible. Choose shady play spaces or take some shade with you.

For most of the day there is as much scattered UV from the sky as there is from the direct sun so even when your child is in the shade, UV can still reach them. It is important that children continue to wear a hat, appropriate clothing and sunscreen in the shade.

5. Slide on some sunglasses

During sun protection times, you can use a hat and sunglasses to protect your child's eyes from UV radiation.

Where practical, children should wear close-fitting, wrap-around sunglasses that cover as much of the eye area as possible. The sunglasses should meet Australian/New Zealand Standard AS/NZS 1067 and preferably be marked EPF (eye protection factor) 10. [Optometry Australia](#) recommends using eye protection all year round.

SunSmart role models for children

Children often copy those around them. Research has shown children are more likely to use sun protection measures if you do.

Convincing teenagers about sun protection

Although adolescents are usually aware of the dangers of too much sun, they often don't plan ahead or forget to use the five sun protection steps.

When reminding your teenager about sun protection:

- Focus on the negative health and beauty effects of sun exposure – such as premature ageing, wrinkles, blotches, freckles or burnt, peeling skin. Teenagers are often very conscious of their appearance, so this may convince them to take precautions.
- Give them a choice – allow your teenager to choose clothing and sunglasses they will be happy to wear and that will provide protection from the sun. Some surf clothing companies produce excellent bucket hats and wrap-around sunglasses that will offer good sun protection and be a style they may be comfortable wearing.
- Remind your teenager to take sunscreen with them when they leave the house. While sunscreen should be used in combination with other measures for best protection, many outdoor venues do not have sufficient shade, and teenagers may be reluctant to wear sun protective clothing and hats. Many young people who get sunburnt report that they forgot to protect themselves – reminding them frequently to pack and apply sunscreen may help.
- Work with your child's school – encourage your school to develop and implement a comprehensive sun protection or UV policy that includes relevant curriculum programs. Cancer Council's SunSmart **Schools Program** can provide you and your school with the resources and support you need. Contact Cancer Council for information.

Where to get help

- Your **GP (doctor)**
- **Maternal and Child Health nurse**
- Local community health centre
- **Pharmacist**
- **NURSE-ON-CALL**. Tel. **1300 60 60 24** – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- **Cancer Council Victoria**. Tel. 13 11 20 for information and support
- **Resources in other languages**, Cancer Council Victoria. Tel. **13 14 50**

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