
Skin cancer - protecting outdoor workers

Summary

- Outdoor workers are in one of the highest risk groups for skin cancer.
 - Your employer has a duty of care to protect you from overexposure to UV radiation.
 - Talk to your employer about introducing sun protection methods to the workplace.
 - Never rely on sunscreen alone. To be adequately protected, use a combination of sun protection measures, and if possible, schedule outdoor work to avoid periods of high UV.
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Australia has one of the highest rates of skin cancer in the world. At least two in every three Australians will develop skin cancer before the age of 70. Around 2,000 Australians die each year from skin cancer, with more than 2,000 people treated daily.

Overexposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation is the main cause of skin cancer. UV radiation is classified as a 'Class 1 Carcinogen' by the International Agency for Research on Cancer. Class 1 substances (which also include asbestos and tobacco) are known to cause cancer in humans. All skin types can be damaged by overexposure to UV. Damage is permanent, irreversible and increases with increased exposure to UV radiation.

Work-related skin cancer statistics

In 2006, it was estimated that in Australia approximately 200 melanomas and 34,000 non-melanoma skin cancers per year are due to occupational exposure to UV. Occupational exposure to UV does not only occur by direct sun exposure, but via reflection from surfaces and scattering of UV through the atmosphere.

Between 2000 and 2012, a total of 1,970 workers' compensation claims for sun-related injury or disease were made in Australia, at a total cost of \$63 million. The number and cost of compensation claims relating to sun-related injury or disease showed an upward trend during this period.

Skin cancer and sun protection in the workplace

Outdoor workers and their employers have a shared responsibility to make sure that workers are protected from the sun to minimise the risk of skin cancer. Victorian health and safety legislation requires employers, so far as practical, to provide and maintain a healthy and safe working environment, and employees, so far as practical, to adhere to safety practices.

Having a comprehensive sun protection program, which includes a range of simple protective measures, can prevent sun-related injuries and reduce the suffering and costs associated with skin cancer – including reduced productivity, morale and financial returns.

It is recommended that employers implement a range of measures to reduce workers' exposure to UV radiation, such as:

- conducting periodic assessments of the UV exposure risk to all workers
 - providing information, instruction and training for workers about UV radiation and protection
 - providing sun protection control measures in line with occupational hazard controls – provide shade, modify reflective surfaces, reschedule outdoor work programs, provide personal protective equipment and clothing (broad-brimmed hats, sunglasses, clothing, sunscreen)
 - developing a sun protection policy that documents control measures, and that is endorsed by senior management
 - implementing a monitoring and review process to determine the effectiveness of control measures, and identifying changes that may further reduce exposure.
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Guidance for employers on developing and putting into place a UV protection program is available from **SunSmart** and **WorkSafe Victoria**. Contact your state or territory's cancer council to find out more about the UV protection services available.

Tax deductions are available for sun-protection products for those who work outside. Talk to your tax advisor or contact the **Australian Taxation Office** on 13 28 61.

Protecting outdoor workers from the sun

There are various ways to reduce exposure to the sun for outdoor workers. Sunscreen alone is not enough. The Australian Work Exposures Study of 2014 showed that although sun protection was used by 95 per cent of Australians outdoor workers exposed to the sun's UV radiation, only 8.7 per cent of workers were classified as fully protected (using protective clothing and a hat, being aware of peak UV times and avoiding being outdoors in the middle of the day where possible).

Don't just wait for hot and sunny days to use sun protection – UV can still be damaging, even on cool, cloudy days. When the UV is 3 or higher, or if workers are due to be outdoors for extended periods, try to:

- reschedule work, where possible, outside of the peak UV times of 10am to 2pm (11am – 3pm daylight savings) to minimise UV exposure
- provide and use shade
- provide and use protective clothing (long sleeves, collared shirts, broad-brimmed hats, hard hat attachments and sunglasses)
- advise and remind outdoor workers to apply broad-spectrum, water-resistant SPF30 or higher sunscreen and reapply every two hours.

Outdoor workers and vitamin D

UV radiation is the major cause of skin cancer, but also the best natural source of vitamin D, which is needed for strong bones and overall health.

The amount of UV exposure needed to maintain healthy vitamin D levels depends on the time of year, location, skin type, day-to-day activity and individual circumstances.

Victorians who work outdoors for long periods of time may need sun protection all year-round as they have an increased risk of skin cancer.

Outdoor workers who are concerned about their vitamin D levels should speak to their doctor.

Where to get help

- WorkSafe Victoria Advisory Service Tel. (03) 9641 1444 or 1800 136 089
- Cancer Council Victoria Helpline Tel. 13 11 20
- Multilingual Cancer Information Line, Victoria Tel. 13 14 50
- Your doctor
- Local community health centre
- Your occupational health and safety officer

Things to remember

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