

Skin cancer - children

Protecting a child from sunburn and long-term overexposure to the sun 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, slop, slap, seek and slide.

Sun exposure in the first 10 years of life determines to a substantial degree the lifetime potential for skin cancer, while sun exposure in later life determines the extent to which this potential is realised. 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.

A healthy UV balance is important

A healthy balance of exposure to the sun's UV radiation is important for everyone's health. Too much UV can cause sunburn, skin and eye damage and skin cancer. Too little UV can lead to low vitamin D levels. Vitamin D regulates calcium levels in the blood and is essential for healthy bones and muscles and general health.

Getting the right amount of sun

The amount of time in the sun needed for most people to help with vitamin D levels depends on the UV Index:

- **When UV levels are 3 and above** – most people require a few minutes of sun exposure to the face, arms and hands (or equivalent area of skin) outside peak UV times on most days of the week.
- **When UV levels are below 3** – most people require two to three hours of sun exposure (over a week) to their face, arms and hands (or equivalent area of skin).

People with naturally very dark skin need three to six times these exposure levels.

Understanding UV levels and risks

We can see sunlight and feel heat (infrared radiation), but we cannot see or feel UV radiation. The UV Index can reach 3 and above even on cool, cloudy days. UV radiation comes directly from the sun. It can also be scattered in the air and reflected by surfaces such as buildings, concrete, sand and snow. UV radiation can also pass through light cloud.

To see what the forecast UV levels are for the day and when sun protection is needed, look for the SunSmart UV Alert in the weather section of your daily newspaper. You can also visit the Australian Bureau of Meteorology website or the SunSmart website. There is a SunSmart UV Alert for over 200 cities across Australia.

Protecting young children from UV damage

Whenever the UV Index reaches 3 and above, remember to use a combination of five sun protection steps – slip, slop, slap, seek and slide.

Slip – on a shirt

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.

Slop – on SPF 30+ sunscreen

Some tips when using sunscreen with children:

- Apply sunscreen about 20 minutes before your child goes outside.
- Apply sunscreen on all parts of your child's body not covered by hats or clothing.
- Reapply sunscreen every two hours, as it can come off. Never use sunscreen as the only form of sun protection, as it does not offer complete protection.
- Never use sunscreen to prolong the amount of time you or your child spends out in the sun. You can still get sunburnt if you stay out in the sun for a considerable period of time, even when you are wearing sunscreen.
- You do not need to spend a lot of money on sunscreen – just make sure it is broad spectrum (protects against UVA and UVB), is labelled 'AS/ NZS 2604:1998', is rated SPF 30+ and is water resistant.
- The Australasian College of Dermatologists recommends the use of a sunscreen 'at any age when there is unavoidable exposure to the sun' and states sunscreen is safe to use on babies. Many brands have a gentler baby's or toddler's formula. Sunscreens with titanium dioxide or zinc oxide reflect the UV radiation away from the skin and are less likely to cause problems with sensitive skin.
- Store sunscreen in conditions under 30C and watch the expiry date.

Slap – on a broad-brimmed hat

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

- Broad-brimmed hats should have a brim of at least 7.5 cm. The brim width for children under ten should be proportional to the size of the child's head and ensure that their face is well shaded.
- A legionnaire hat should have the front peak and the long, back flap meet at the sides to protect the side of the face, neck and ears.
- Bucket hats should have a deep crown and a brim of at least 6 cm (5 cm for young children).
- Baseball caps and visors offer little protection to the cheeks, ears and neck and are not recommended.

Seek – shade

Try to use shade to protect your child whenever possible. However, even when your child is in the shade, UV can still reach them so it is important that children continue to wear a hat, appropriate clothing and sunscreen.

Slide – on some sunglasses

Where practical, children should wear close-fitting, wraparound sunglasses that cover as much of the eye area as possible. The sunglasses should meet Australian Standard AS1067 and preferably be marked EPF (eye protection factor) 10. There are also swimming goggles with EPF 10.

Be a SunSmart role model

Children copy other people. Research has shown children are more likely to use sun protection measures if you do!

Convincing teenagers that sun protection is important

It is often difficult to convince adolescents of the dangers of too much sun, as they may be more concerned that using sun protection isn't 'cool'. Here are some tactics you can try:

- **Focus on the health and beauty effects of sun exposure** – such as premature ageing, wrinkles, blotches, freckles or burnt, peeling skin. Teenagers are 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 will provide protection from the sun. Some surf clothing companies produce excellent bucket hats and wraparound sunglasses that will offer good sun protection and pass the 'cool' test.
- **Work with your child's school** – encourage your school to develop and implement a comprehensive SunSmart policy that includes relevant curriculum programs. Cancer Council Victoria's Schools Program can provide you and your school with the resources and support you need.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre
- SunSmart
- The Cancer Council of Victoria Information and Support Line Tel. 13 11 20
- Multilingual Cancer Information Line, Victoria Tel. (03) 9209 0169

Things to remember

- Protecting your child from sunburn and long-term overexposure to the sun can reduce their risk of developing skin and eye damage and skin cancer later in life.
- Check the UV level each day and whenever the UV is 3 and above, use a combination of sun protection methods – slip, slop, slap, seek and slide for all outdoor activities.
- Encourage your child, whatever their age, to be SunSmart and maintain a healthy balance of UV exposure.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

SunSmart

Content on this website is provided for education and information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not imply endorsement and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. Content has been prepared for Victorian residents and wider Australian audiences, and was accurate at the time of publication. Readers should note that, over time, currency and completeness of the information may change. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2012 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.