

Overexposed

DESPITE YEARS OF SUCCESSFUL AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION, AUSTRALIANS STILL NEED TO DO MORE TO AVOID EXCESSIVE SUN EXPOSURE, REPORTS JUSTINE COSTIGAN.

It's a statistic that most Australians are already familiar with: Australians have the highest rate of skin cancer in the world.

In fact, up to two thirds of us will be diagnosed with skin cancer during our lifetime, making it Australia's most common form of cancer. And it's a tragic fact that of the more than 1000 deaths in Australia from skin cancer each year, many could have been easily prevented.

For over 25 years it has been the goal of the The Cancer Council Victoria's skin cancer prevention program, Sunsmart, to deliver the skin cancer prevention message. And despite initial lack of funding, the program has been extremely successful, growing from the 'slip, slop, slap' community service advertising of 1980 into a mass media campaign incorporating sponsorship of sporting associations, professional education, and advocacy for policy development in schools, early childhood services and workplaces.

Yet despite the growing awareness of the Sunsmart message the Australasian College of Dermatologists (ACD) believes we need to be doing more to prevent another generation risking their lives in the sun.

The Queensland faculty of the ACD has had a Sunsmart committee for a number of years. Chaired by Dr Jenny Byth, the committee has focused on making sure the Sunsmart message is getting through to schools, where children are most at risk of exposure to the sun.

Making Sunsmart behaviour an integral part of the way the schools work is crucial says Dr Byth. "The most important issue as far as I can see is that of timetabling. Schools use the fact that children are reminded to wear hats and to use sunscreen to allow them to continue to schedule events much the same way as they would do it in the United Kingdom. For example, we still have all-day swimming carnivals in Queensland and outdoor athletic events and fetes at times of high UV index. Of course if we had the money to cover the relevant venues, this would not matter. Until we do, I believe that some sensible measures need to be undertaken."

With summer just around the corner the Australian College of Dermatologists recommends the following precautions to help minimise your chances of developing skin cancer.

- Avoid the sun in the middle of the day (10 am to 3 pm) as much as possible.
- Stay in the shade whenever possible.
- Wear protective clothing.
- Apply SPF 30+, broad-spectrum sunscreen to the skin. Apply it 20 minutes or so before going outside and reapply every two hours whilst in the sun.
- Have regular skin checks by your GP or dermatologist, especially if new and persisting skin spots develop.



Dr Byth suggests schools:

- hold swimming carnivals at night or break them down into shorter school events so that the whole school is not outside for a whole day;
- timetable athletic carnivals and fetes using the predicted and historical UV indices available on the ARPANSA web site;
- introduce mandatory wearing of long sleeved swim shirts in uncovered pools;
- ensure school hats comply with the Australian standard (8 to 10 cm brim or legionnaire's style) and that hats are worn around the campus at all times;
- remind children to use sunscreen and give them the time to apply it before lunch breaks as well as before sporting events. Children should be instructed to apply sunscreen thickly and preferably 20 minutes before they start running around in the sun; and
- should ensure that adults model better sunsmart behaviour, for example by wearing a hat around the school campus at all times.

Pathologists play a vital role in the diagnosis of skin cancer. When a doctor (dermatologist, surgeon or GP) excises a skin lesion the tissue is sent to a pathologist who will look at it under a microscope and make the definitive diagnosis.

Anatomical Pathologist Dr David Weedon from Sullivan Nicolaides Pathology in Brisbane says he is still seeing evidence of the damage of childhood sun exposure. "As the population ages, I'm seeing a big growth in diagnosis of melanoma from people who have had a lot of sun exposure throughout their lives. In the over 80s I'm starting to see rapid growth melanomas that can present in just a few weeks."

Yet for those who have spent the last 25 years heeding the Sunsmart message there is good news. Awareness and concern about skin cancer is on the rise. "People are now seeing a doctor if they suspect a problem and we can treat cancer before it becomes deadly," says Dr Weedon. "But eventually that exposure in youth catches up with you."

Even more reason to cover up before its too late. 🔥