

Sun protection in the workplace

'Sun protection programs that aim to reduce workplace exposure to solar UVR are important if skin cancer incidence and death rates are to be reduced'

Recommendations

The Cancer Council Australia recommends that workplaces have a comprehensive sun protection program in place that includes:

1. Periodic assessment of the solar ultraviolet radiation (UVR) exposure risk to employees who work outdoors for all or part of the day.
2. The introduction and maintenance of sun protective control measures in line with occupational hazard controls including:
 - a. Engineering controls such as providing shade;
 - b. Administrative controls such as rescheduling outdoor work tasks and using the SunSmart UV Alert* to inform workers when to use sun protection; and
 - c. Personal protective equipment such as the provision and use of sun protective work clothing, sun protective hats, SPF 30+ sunscreen and sunglasses.
3. Providing education and training for all outdoor employees, safety officers, health and safety representatives, supervisors and managers to create awareness on how to work safely in the sun and encourage workers to examine their own skin.
4. Documenting the sun protection program, including control measures, in a written policy. Employers and employees should work together to develop this policy, which should include a process to monitor compliance.

**The SunSmart UV Alert is based on the Global Solar UV Index, a rating system adopted from the World Health Organisation¹. It indicates the amount of solar UVR reaching the earth's surface. The higher the number, the greater the potential for skin damage.*

The Bureau of Meteorology issues the SunSmart UV Alert when the UV Index is forecast to reach 3 or above. At 3 and above the level of solar UVR is strong enough to damage the skin, so workers need to use sun protection.

Note: This statement is a summary of key sun protection information for workplaces. More detail can be found in the booklet 'Skin cancer and outdoor work – A guide for employers' or from your state or territory Cancer Council.

Background

Exposure to solar UVR causes skin and eye damage and is also the main cause of skin cancer in Australia. Solar UVR is carcinogenic to humans.²

Employees who work outdoors for all or part of the day are at risk of skin cancer. All skin types can be damaged by exposure to solar UVR. Damage can be permanent and irreversible and increases with each exposure.

Sun protection programs that aim to reduce exposure to solar UVR are important if skin cancer incidence and death rates are to be reduced. Sun protection programs in the workplace are important for the following reasons:

- Outdoor workers, both full-time and part-time, have a higher than average risk of basal cell carcinoma (BCC) and squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) because they spend long periods of time working in the sun, all year round, over many years of working life.
- Indoor workers have a slightly higher than average risk of melanoma because they spend most of the week inside but are exposed to short bursts of intense sunlight on weekends and during holidays.
- Occupational Health and Safety legislation in each state/territory provides an established framework through which to implement sun protection programs and policy.
- The Radiation Protection Standard for Occupational Exposure to Ultraviolet Radiation 2006 encourages UVR exposures to be less than that required to obtain observable biological effects. Outdoor workers without adequate protection may exceed the exposure limits set out in the standard.³
- Preventing occupational disease is a national health and safety priority action area.⁴
- Workplaces facilitate access to high-risk and difficult to reach groups.
- Workplaces offer opportunities to implement changes to workplace environments that have ongoing and long lasting effects.

Legal responsibilities

Occupational Health and Safety legislation, specific to each Australian state or territory, has a clear objective of preventing illness and injury at work.

All employers should protect employees by providing a safe working environment that is free from health risks. This includes taking proper steps to reduce the known health risks associated with occupational exposure to solar UVR for employees who work outdoors.

Employees also have a duty to take care of their own health and safety and cooperate with employers' efforts to improve health and safety. To work safely in the sun, employees should follow workplace sun protection policies and practices, attend training and use supplied protective equipment as instructed.

A workplace sun protection program

Risk assessment

A risk assessment can be used to identify both employees who have a high risk of exposure to solar UVR as well as work situations where exposure occurs. The risk assessment should examine factors such as:

- The geographical location of the job
- The time of the year when outdoor work occurs
- The time of the day when outdoor work occurs
- The pattern and length of exposure
- The availability and use of sun protection control measures
- The presence of reflective surfaces
- The presence of photosensitising substances
- Extended vehicle usage
- The presence of artificial sources of UVR such as arc welding and ultraviolet lamps.

Sun protection control measures

Once the risk has been assessed employers, employees and employee representatives should work together to make changes to minimise risk. Strategies to reduce risk may include:

- Increasing the amount of shade provided and used in the workplace
- Modifying reflective surfaces
- Considering applying clear or tinted films to side windows of vehicles
- Rescheduling outdoor work programs
- Rotating employees so the same person is not always out in the sun
- Using the SunSmart UV Alert for your region to inform workers on a daily basis when to use sun protection
- Providing personal protection such as sun protective work clothing, sun protective hats, SPF 30+ sunscreen and sunglasses.

Employers should provide supervision to ensure correct use and compliance with control measures. Where monitoring reveals non-compliance, it should be managed using the organisation's standard disciplinary procedures. When sun protection control measures have been implemented they should be monitored and reviewed on a regular basis, or at least every two years.

Sun protection policy and training

A sun protection policy should be developed to document why and how the solar UVR risk is to be managed by the workplace. This should include details of training and education to promote both the sun protection control measures and safe work practices required.

Health surveillance and skin cancer

Occupational health and safety legislation requires employers to monitor the health of employees. In regards to skin cancer, this involves encouraging employees to examine their own skin.

To enable employees to effectively examine their own skin, employers should provide employees with appropriate self-examination information including:

- The need to check their own skin
- The importance of becoming familiar with how their skin normally looks
- How often they should examine their skin
- Tips on how to examine their skin
- What to look for when examining their skin
- What to do if a suspicious spot is noticed.

References

1. World Health Organization (WHO). *Global Solar UV Index: A practical guide: A joint recommendation of the World Health Organization, World Meteorological Organization, United Nations Environment Programme, and the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection* Geneva, Switzerland: WHO, 2002.
2. International Agency for Research on Cancer. *Solar and ultraviolet radiation*. IARC Monographs on the Evaluation of Carcinogenic Risks to Humans. Lyon, France: IARC, 1992.
3. Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency (ARPANSA). *Radiation Protection Standard for Occupational Exposure to Ultraviolet Radiation*. Radiation Protection Series No. 12. Yallambie: Commonwealth of Australia, 2006.
4. Australian Safety and Compensation Council. *Report on indicators for occupational disease* Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2006.

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