

# Sense in the Sun

**Overexposure to both the sun and artificial ultraviolet (UV) radiation can cause sunburn, skin and eye damage and skin cancers. Australia has the highest rate of skin cancer in the world. At least 2 out of 3 Australians will be diagnosed with skin cancer before the age of 70. Most skin cancers can be prevented by following SunSmart guidelines.**

## UV radiation

UV radiation is the part of the sun's rays that damages skin. It cannot be seen or felt. It is not related to temperature and can be high on cool and overcast days. The UV Index is a measure of the amount of damaging UV radiation from the sun. UV Index levels depend on the season, time of day, region and altitude:

- UV radiation is strongest between 10 am and 3 pm
- Clouds do not block out UV radiation
- Light coloured and shiny surfaces (e.g., concrete, sand, snow, water) reflect sunlight and increase exposure to UV radiation
- UV radiation passes through water
- Solariums and sun beds emit UV radiation up to five times as strong as the midday summer sun.



## SunSmart UV Alert

The SunSmart UV Alert is issued by the Bureau of Meteorology when the UV Index is forecast to reach 3 or above. This is the level of UV radiation that can damage our skin and eyes and lead to

skin cancer. To find out the UV Index levels in your region, check the weather page of your daily newspaper or the Australian Bureau of Meteorology website [www.bom.gov.au/weather/uv](http://www.bom.gov.au/weather/uv) When the UV Index is 3 or above, sun protection is required.

## Skin cancer

The major cause of skin cancer is UV radiation and anyone who spends time in the sun is at risk of developing skin cancer, regardless of skin colour. The risk of skin cancer increases with age, as older people have generally had more sun exposure than younger people.

## Types of skin cancer

### Melanoma

- The most dangerous skin cancer.
- May appear as a new spot or an existing spot, freckle or mole that changes colour, size or shape.
- Usually has an irregular or smudgy outline and may be an irregular mix of colours.
- Grows over weeks to months and can appear anywhere on the body.
- If treated early, 90% of people with melanoma can be cured.
- If untreated, can spread to other parts of the body.

### Squamous cell carcinoma

- Appears as a thickened, red, scaly spot that may bleed easily, crust or ulcerate.
- Appears on skin most often exposed to UV radiation.

- Grows over some months.
- Usually able to be treated if detected early.

### Basal cell carcinoma

- Most common and least dangerous skin cancer.
- Looks like a round or flattened lump or dry, scaly area.
- Red, pale or pearly in colour.
- May become an ulcer or sore that doesn't heal properly.
- Usually appears on skin most often exposed to UV radiation (head, neck, upper torso)
- Grows slowly.
- Usually able to be treated if detected early.

## Other skin spots

Sunspots, freckles and moles may be warning signs of increased risk of sun damage and skin cancer.

### Sunspots (solar keratosis)

- Red, flat scaling dry skin which may sting if scratched.
- Appear on skin most often exposed to the sun.
- Most common in people over 40 years of age.

### Freckles and moles

- Harmless brown and black spots on the skin.
- Moles are usually round or oval shaped and may be raised.
- Usually uniform in shape and even coloured.

- May have uneven borders and multiple colours like brown and black.
- Number of moles on skin may increase with sun exposure.

## Self care

Whenever the UV Index is 3 or above, protect your skin using a combination of SunSmart strategies including:

- **Slip** on sun- protective clothing. Cover as much skin as possible.
- **Slop** on SPF 30+ sunscreen
- **Slap** on a hat. Wear a wide-brimmed hat that shades face, head, neck and ears
- **Seek** shade
- **Slide** on sunglasses – close fitting wrap-around styles that meet Australian Standards are best
- Take extra care between 10am and 3pm when UV radiation is most intense
- Do not use sunlamps, sun beds or solariums.

**Note:** Some medicines and cosmetics can make skin more sensitive to the sun – ask a pharmacist.

## Sunscreens

- Use an SPF 30+ broad-spectrum, water-resistant sunscreen.
- Apply to clean dry skin 20 minutes before going outside to allow time for it to bond to the skin.
- Re-apply sunscreen every two hours, or according to directions.
- Don't use a sunscreen product after it's expiry date.

## Important

Check your skin at least every three months, including armpits, inner legs, ears, eyelids, scalp, hands, feet and back. Consult a doctor promptly if you have:

- An unusual skin condition that does not heal within four weeks – including any lump, sore, ulcer or scaly patch on the skin, or white patch on the lips
- A freckle, mole or spot that appears or changes colour, size or shape.

## Vitamin D

Vitamin D, which our bodies need for calcium absorption, bone formation and muscle strength, is formed in our skin on exposure to sunlight. Consequently, we need to find a balance between receiving enough sun exposure for adequate vitamin D and avoiding sun exposure that put us at increased risk of skin cancer. For adequate vitamin D, most people with fair-coloured skin need to expose face, hands and arms to sunlight for about 6–8 minutes (before 10am or after 3pm) on most days in summer and for about 15–30 minutes in winter (required exposure varies with time of day, season and region). Darker-skinned people and the elderly need more sun exposure. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.

## For more information

### **The Cancer Council Australia**

Helpline phone: 13 11 20

Website: [www.cancer.org.au/sunsmart](http://www.cancer.org.au/sunsmart)

### **National Skin Cancer Awareness Campaign**

Website: [www.skincancer.gov.au](http://www.skincancer.gov.au)

### **State and Territory Cancer Councils**

Listed under 'C' in the white pages of the phone book.

### **Healthdirect Australia**

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: [www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

### **Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)**

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

### **National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information**

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)

### **The Poisons Information Centre**

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

*Pharmacists are medicines experts.  
Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.*

## Related fact cards

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» *Vision Impairment*

Your Self Care Pharmacy: