

Protection from sun exposure

A sunny day usually makes most people feel good, but too much sunlight can cause lifelong damage to the skin. It is not simply sudden exposure while on holiday that is harmful. Even a tan that has been built up gradually can be harmful to health. A tan is a sign that the skin has potentially been damaged.

Skin damage is caused by ultraviolet rays in sunlight. People whose job keep them outdoors for a long time (such as building, construction and civil engineering workers) may, if their skin is unprotected, get more sunlight on their skin than is healthy for them. They will then be at greater risk of developing skin cancer.

In the short term, excess exposure of unprotected skin to the sun can cause blistering and peeling. Even mild reddening of the skin is a sign of skin damage.

In the long term, too much sun will speed up ageing of the skin, making it leathery, mottled and wrinkled. However, the most serious issue is an increased chance of developing skin cancer.

Ultraviolet radiation from the sun is a major cause of skin cancer. Cases have doubled in the last 20 years. Around 800 construction workers are diagnosed with skin cancer every year as a result of sun exposure. Men most commonly develop skin cancer on their chest or back, where as for women it is on their legs.

More than two adults aged 15 to 34 are now diagnosed with skin cancer every day in the UK.

Some medicines, and contact with some chemicals used at work (such as bitumen products), can also make the skin more sensitive to sunlight (photosensitivity).



Site sunscreen dispenser with details of the day's UV level

Protecting the skin

Even if their skin is not fair or freckled, workers should be particularly careful while working outside in summer in the three or four hours around midday when the sun is most intense. Workers should:

- protect themselves with the type of clothing outlined below.
- try to avoid mild reddening, which is a sign of skin damage as well as being a sign of early burning.
- pay attention in health and safety inductions and toolbox talks to information on the importance of daily sun safety routines.
- try to work and take breaks in the shade if possible (this will reduce the danger of harming the skin).
- not be complacent (the skin's most vulnerable areas are the back of the neck and the head – where possible, keep these areas covered).
- try not to get a tan: it might look good, but it indicates that the skin has already been damaged.
- stay in the shade whenever possible, during breaks and especially at lunch time.
- use a high-factor sunscreen of at least SPF15 on any exposed skin.
- drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration.
- check skin regularly for any unusual moles or spots. See a doctor promptly if there are changes in shape, size or colour, or are causing itching or bleeding.

Protective clothing

Using protective clothing to cover up is the main way to avoid the dangers of developing skin cancer.

- Work clothing made from close-woven fabric, such as a long-sleeved shirt and jeans, will stop most of the UV rays.
- A safety helmet will afford protection; and the addition of a hanging flap will protect the back of the neck.
- Keep a long-sleeved shirt or other top on.

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