

Keep your top on

Health risks from working in the sun



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Advice for outdoor workers from the Health and Safety Executive and the Health Departments in England, Scotland and Wales

A sunny day makes most of us feel good, but too much sunlight can be hard on 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 been damaged.

The problem is caused by the ultraviolet (UV) rays in sunlight. People whose job keeps them outdoors for a long time, such as farm or building site workers, market gardeners, outdoor activity workers and some public service workers could get more sun on their skin than is healthy for them. Such people can be at greater risk of skin cancer. This leaflet provides some basic information to help you protect yourself.

What are the dangers?

In the short term...

sunburn can blister your skin and make it peel, but even mild reddening is a sign of skin damage.

In the long term...

too much sun will speed up the ageing of your skin, making it leathery, mottled and wrinkled, but the most serious effect is an increased chance of developing skin cancer.

Abnormal reactions to sunlight

Some medicines, contact with some chemicals used at work (such as dyes, wood preservatives, coal-tar and pitch products), and contact with some plants, can make your skin more sensitive to sunlight. Your works doctor or family doctor should be able to advise you further. Take this leaflet with you.

Who is at risk of skin cancer?

Some people are more liable to skin cancers than others. People with white skin are at most risk. Take particular care if you have:

- fair or freckled skin that doesn't tan, or goes red or burns before it tans;
- red or fair hair and light coloured eyes;

- a large number of moles - 50 or more.

Workers of Asian or Afro-Caribbean origin are less at risk, but they should still take care in the sun to avoid damage to eyes, skin ageing and dehydration.

What can I do to protect myself?

Even if your skin is not fair and freckled, you should still be particularly careful while you are working out of doors in the summer in the three or four hours around midday. The sun is most intense at these times. Even on cloudy days, UV can filter through.

Some Dos and Don'ts to avoid the dangers are:

- Do try to avoid the mild reddening which is a sign of skin damage as well as being an early sign of burning.
- Do try to work and take your breaks in the shade if you can - this will reduce your risk of harming your skin and also help to keep you cool.
- Do continue to take care when you go on holiday - your skin remembers every exposure.
- Don't be complacent; get to know your skin's most vulnerable areas (eg back of neck, head) and keep them covered.
- Don't try to get a tan - it's not a healthy sign. It might look good but it indicates that the skin has already been damaged. A suntan does not eliminate the long-term cancer risk which is associated with prolonged exposure to the sun; nor will it protect against premature ageing.

Clothing

Cover up. Ordinary clothing made from close-woven fabric, such as a long-sleeved workshirt and jeans, will stop most of the UV.

Wear a hat. A wide-brimmed hat will shade your face and head, the areas which suffer most from sunlight. A safety helmet will provide some shade for the head. A hanging flap can protect the back of your neck.

Keep your shirt or other top on, especially while you are working around midday. Don't be tempted to leave it off, even if your skin tans easily and does not burn.

Sunscreens

Hats and other clothing are the best form of protection, but sunscreen creams and lotions can add useful protection for parts of your body that are not easy to shade from the sun. Look for a sun protection factor (SPF) rating of 15 or more as it protects against UVA and UVB.

Read the supplier's instructions on how it should be applied. Don't forget the backs of your hands.

Check your skin

The first warning sign is often a small scabby spot which does not clear after a few weeks. Look for changed or newly formed moles or any skin discolouration. It is normal for new moles to appear until you are about 18 years old. As an adult you

should pay particular attention to any growths which appear on the face, especially around the nose and eyes, or on the backs of the hands; you should show your doctor any moles which change in size, colour, shape or start to bleed.

If you notice any of these signs consult your own doctor, or your works medical department if you have one. Show them this leaflet and explain that you have an outdoor job.

Fortunately most of these signs will be harmless, but medical checks may be needed to be sure. Even if a spot is cancerous, simple modern treatments can usually cure it and most don't spread to other parts of the body. The smaller the spot the easier it is to cure. So don't put off going to the doctor when you know you should.

If you have any kind of medical check-up tell the doctor that you have an outdoor job and ask if there are any suspicious signs on your skin.

Don't delay. If you think something might be wrong get it looked at quickly.

More information on sun protection is available on Cancer Research UK's Sunsmart website www.sunsmart.org.uk.

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This leaflet contains notes on good practice which are not compulsory but which you may find helpful in considering what you need to do.

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