

Sun Sense and Skin Cancer

Skin cancer is one of the most common cancers in the UK, with more than 100,000 new cases diagnosed each year.* As much as we all like the sun and getting a tan, it is essential to know the risk factors and apply common sense rigorously.

Unlike many cancers, skin cancer is a disease that can mostly be avoided. Exposure to sunlight is the main cause, and taking simple precautions in the sun can help you avoid skin cancer.

Types of skin cancer

Non-melanoma skin cancer and malignant melanoma

There are two main types of skin cancer: malignant melanoma, which is the most serious type, and non-melanoma skin cancer – the most common and easily treated skin cancer. The types you may hear referred to as Basal and Squamous cell carcinoma are generally grouped together as non-melanoma skin cancers. Easily treated skin cancer accounts for around 67,000 new cases each year, while approximately 8,000 people are diagnosed with the more serious malignant melanoma type.

Two types of sun rays

Both types of ray emitted by the sun can be dangerous:

- UVA – (Ultraviolet Radiation A) causes skin damage by penetrating the skins deep layers. UVA is responsible for increasing 'photoaging' of the skin. UVA not only increases UVB's cancer-causing effects, but may directly

cause some skin cancers, including melanomas

- UVB – (Ultraviolet Radiation B): causes sun burn and damage to the skin; these rays are more potent than UVA. The sunscreen you buy helps to block out UVB rays

But it is also important to remember – there is no such thing as safe or healthy tanning in the sun or under a sun bed. The only healthy tan is a fake one from a bottle.

Skin cancer factors

There are a number of factors which increase your risk of getting skin cancer. These include:

- Family history of skin cancer
- Skin with a lot of moles and/or freckles
- Fair skin and blue eyes
- Skin that burns easily
- Skin that has been badly sunburnt in the last five years
- Skin exposed intermittently to strong sunshine or sun beds

Safety in the sun

Common sense applied alongside recommendations from health professionals is the best way to protect yourself and your family:

- Take care not to burn by covering up with loose, cool clothing. How about a hat and sun glasses?
- If you have to go out in the direct sunlight during the hottest part of the day – 11am to 3pm – make sure you act sensibly and where possible walk in the shade
- Consider using a high factor sunscreen of at least (SPF) 15 and a 4 star UVA rating
- Protect yourself whilst swimming – you can still burn under the surface of the water
- Re-apply sunscreen regularly, especially after swimming
- Children need extra care as fair skin is more sensitive and can easily burn
- Do not be fooled by a cool breeze or light cloud
- After-sun creams may help soothe sunburnt or dry skin but they will not repair most serious skin damage

Symptoms and treatment

- Watch out for moles that change shape, size, colour, become bigger, itchy, inflamed, weep or bleed. Consult a doctor or health professional if you are concerned about changes
- Most skin cancers are curable with treatment usually involving surgery, which can be disfiguring

The myth of sun bed safety

It is now being recommended that persons under the age of 18 do not use sun beds. No one should start or develop a tan using a sun bed as the type of UV light used can cause an increased risk of developing skin cancer. Other risks from sun beds include burnt and peeling skin, rashes, eye infections, premature wrinkling and increased risk of cataracts in the eyes.

What the abbreviations mean

- SPF (Sun Protector Factor) on sunscreen lotions, is a measure of how much sunscreen protects your skin from burning. The higher the SPF, the greater the protection
- UVA – Ultraviolet Radiation type A
- UVB – Ultraviolet Radiation type B