

Eight questions about sun protection



Question 1: What is UV radiation and why is it important?

Solar ultraviolet (UV) radiation is invisible energy produced by the sun. It's made up of three wavelengths: UVA, UVB and UVC.

Both UVA and UVB can reach the earth's surface and are classified as human carcinogens, meaning they cause cancer. Every time we overexpose our skin to radiation from the sun, some of our skin cells are damaged and we increase our risk of developing skin cancer.

A sunburn or a tan is a sign of skin being damaged by solar UV radiation. All skin types can be damaged, but fairer skin is at increased risk.

Solar UV radiation has also been linked with cancer of the eye, cataracts (clouding on the lens of the eye) and pterygium (a growth on the white of the eye).

The UV Index describes the strength of solar UV radiation. The higher the number, the stronger the solar UV radiation and the faster unprotected skin will be damaged.

If you work outside frequently, you should always use protective clothing including hats, sunglasses and sunscreen, regardless of the UV Index. If you are outside occasionally, then you should use sun protection when the UV is 3 and above.

A UV forecast for many locations is available from myuv.com.au. You can also use the free **SunSmart Global UV app** to find out the UV index at your location.



Question 2. Do I need to protect my skin on cool, cloudy or windy days?

If the UV is 3 or above, you should protect your skin regardless of the temperature, wind, or cloud cover. Sun damage is caused by ultraviolet (UV) radiation, not temperature. UV radiation is measured using the UV Index. We can't see it or feel it, and how high this number gets is not a result of the temperature. For that reason, it's important to realise that UV can be just as high on a cold day as on a hot one. While UV radiation is higher in summer than in winter, it is still present every day of the year. If it's windy and you get a red face, it's likely to be sunburn. There's no such thing as 'windburn'.

Cancer Council recommends using all 5 forms of sun protection whenever the UV index is 3 or above, regardless of air temperature or what season it is.

This means:

- **SLIP** on sun-protective clothing
- **SLOP** on broad-spectrum, water-resistant SPF 50 or 50+ sunscreen
- **SLAP** on a broad brimmed hat
- **SEEK** shade
- **SLIDE** on sunglasses

Key tips:

- Don't rely on temperature, cloud coverage or season to determine when you need to protect yourself from the sun - check the UV instead.
- To find the UV Index for your area, go to the weather section in your daily newspaper, visit the Bureau of Meteorology website, or check out the Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency's (ARPANSA) website. UV alerts are also available on some radio and mobile weather forecasts.
- You can also access daily sun protection times by visiting **myuv.com.au** or downloading the free **SunSmart Global UV app**.

Question 3: When spending extended periods of time outside, will sunscreen alone provide enough protection from the sun?

Sunscreen should never be used as the only method of protecting yourself against sun damage.

Cancer Council recommends using any sunscreen that is labelled broad-spectrum, water-resistant and SPF50 or 50+. Remember to also check the expiry date, as products that are past their use-by date will not give proper protection.

Sunscreen should be applied 20 minutes before exposure to UV in order to create the intended protective barrier. It should be applied liberally and evenly to clean and dry skin. Irrespective of the water resistance of the sunscreen, it should always be reapplied at least every two hours. Swimming, sport, sweating and towel drying can reduce the effectiveness of the product, so sunscreen should always be reapplied after these activities. Sunscreen is not a suit of armour, remember to re-apply every two hours, and use in conjunction with protective clothing, a broad brimmed hat, shade and sunglasses.



Question 4: Do I need to spend long periods of time in the sun to get enough vitamin D?

For most people, adequate vitamin D levels are reached through regular incidental exposure to the sun. When UV levels are 3 or above, most people get enough Vitamin D with just a few minutes of sun exposure while completing everyday tasks – like walking to the car or the shops. During peak UV times, it is important to reduce your risk of skin cancer by protecting your skin.

In some southern areas of Australia, there are times of the year when sun protection may not be necessary, generally late autumn and winter. If you live in an area where the UV Index falls below 3 during these months, you do not require sun protection unless you are at high altitudes or near highly reflective surfaces like snow, work outdoors, or are outside for extended periods.

Being physically active (e.g. gardening or going for a brisk walk) also helps boost vitamin D levels.

People who may be at higher risk of Vitamin D deficiency include:

- people with naturally very dark skin
- people with conditions or medication that impact vitamin D absorption
- those with little or no sun exposure who frequently cover their skin

Overexposure to UV is never recommended, even if you have a vitamin D deficiency. If you are concerned about your vitamin D levels, speak to your doctor.



Question 5: Do cosmetics with a sun protection factor (SPF) provide enough sun protection?

Cosmetic products which contain sunscreen are not considered to be a therapeutic product and are therefore not regulated in Australia. They vary in how much SPF protection they have but it can often be very little and should not be relied on to protect your skin from the sun. Most cosmetic products offer either no protection or protection that is much lower than the recommended SPF50 or 50+.

If you plan to wear sunscreen and moisturisers or cosmetics, it is best to apply your sunscreen first – on clean, dry skin. This will allow the sunscreen to disperse effectively. Best practice is to reapply your sunscreen every two hours – not just once in the morning.

Question 6: Does a tan indicate good health?

There's no such thing as a 'healthy' tan. If skin darkens after exposure to the sun, it is a sign of skin cells in trauma, even without redness or peeling.

Skin darkens as a way of trying to protect itself because the UV rays are damaging living cells. If you can tan easily, you are still at risk of skin cancer and need to use sun protection.

Question 7: Are skin cancers easily treated?

Skin cancer treatment can be much more serious than simply having a lesion removed. It can include surgery, chemotherapy and can result in permanent scarring, as well as the need for long-term monitoring. Skin cancer can also spread to other parts of your body. Each year, more than 2000 Australians die of skin cancer.

Be alert for any new spots or changes to existing spots and consult your doctor as soon as possible if you notice anything new or changing.

Minimising overexposure to UV radiation from the sun is the most effective way to prevent skin cancer.

Question 8: Can people of any skin tone develop skin cancer?

All Australians are at risk of skin cancer due to the high levels of UV radiation we experience.

Regardless of skin type, exposure to UV radiation from the sun and other artificial sources, such as solariums, can cause permanent damage to the skin. People with skin types that are less likely to burn can still receive enough UV exposure to risk developing skin cancer.

However, some Australians have a higher risk, including people who have:

- had a previous skin cancer, including melanoma
- a family history of skin cancer
- fair or freckled skin, especially those with skin that burns easily
- red or fair hair and light-coloured eyes (blue or green)
- lots of moles on their body
- worked or currently work outdoors
- had short, intense periods of exposure to UV radiation
- actively tanned or used solariums
- a weakened immune system
- certain skin conditions, including sunspots.

It is important to remember that excessive exposure to the sun does not just happen when deliberately seeking a tan. In a high UV environment like Australia, we can be exposed to dangerous levels of UV radiation during all sorts of daily activities, such as working outdoors, gardening, walking the dog or having a picnic.

UV damage to the skin is permanent and cumulative. The good news is that it's never too late to start protecting your skin – using sun protection at any age can help reduce your risk of skin cancer.

Find your UV levels

When the UV index is 3 or above, protect yourself in **five ways** from skin cancer.



SLIP



SLOP



SLAP



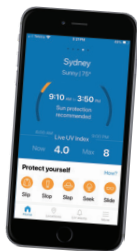
SEEK



SLIDE

You can access daily sun protection times and UV levels for your location:

- using the weather section of the newspaper
- using the free **SunSmart Global UV app** for your smart phone or tablet
- downloading the SunSmart widget for websites: **sunsmart.com.au/resources/uv-widget**
- online at:
 - Bureau of Meteorology: **bom.gov.au**
 - ARPANSA: **arpansa.gov.au**
 - MyUV: **myuv.com.au**



If you need to talk about cancer, call Cancer Council 13 11 20. This is a confidential service.

If you are deaf, or have a hearing or speech impairment, contact the National Relay Service **communications.gov.au/accesshub/nrs**

If you need information in a language other than English, call The Translating and Interpreting Service on **131 450**.

For further information and details please visit our website **cancer.org.au**



Aboriginal Respect Symbol. Designed by Marcus Lee Design for Cancer Council NSW.