



Safety Bulletin 127

Sun Protection

Health risks from working in the sun

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. Skin cancer is the most common form of cancer in the UK, with over 40 000 new cases diagnosed each year. UV radiation should be considered an occupational hazard for people who work outdoors. This bulletin 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 bulletin 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.

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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 (e.g. 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 work shirt 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, and 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 bulletin 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.

Things you can do as an employer

- ✚ Include sun protection advice in routine health and safety training. Inform workers that a tan is not healthy; it is a sign that skin has already been damaged by the sun.
- ✚ Encourage workers to keep covered up during summer months, especially at lunchtime when the sun is at its hottest. They can cover up with a long sleeved shirt, and a hat with a brim or flap that protects the ears and neck.
- ✚ Encourage workers to use sunscreen of at least SPF 15 on any part of the body they don't cover up, and apply as directed on the product. They might prefer to use a spray or an alcohol – based (non greasy) sunscreen.
- ✚ Encourage workers to take their breaks in the shade, if possible, rather than staying out in the sun.
- ✚ Consider scheduling work to minimise exposure.
- ✚ Site water points and rest areas in the shade.
- ✚ Encourage workers to drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration
- ✚ Keep your workers informed about the dangers of sun exposure.
- ✚ Encourage workers to check their skin regularly for unusual spots or moles that change size, shape or colour and to seek medical advice promptly if they find anything that causes them concern.



Consulting your employees and their safety representatives is important. Take their views into account when introducing any new sun safety initiatives.

What are the benefits to your company?

- ✚ Fewer absence days through sunburn
- ✚ A healthier and better-informed workforce
- ✚ Reduced risk to employees of skin cancer from long-term sun exposure.

This bulletin contains information on good practice, which is not compulsory but you may find it helpful in considering what you need to do.

If you require any further information, clarification or assistance with the above, then please do not hesitate to contact us:

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Source – The Health and Safety Executive (HSE)

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