

Sense in the sun

The Health Column

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Two in three Australians will be diagnosed with skin cancer by the time they are 70 years old. This statistic is a wake-up call to all Australians as summer approaches. Over the next three years, approximately 44,000 Australians (or 40 a day) will be told they have the deadliest form of skin cancer, melanoma. Almost two in three will be men.

The incidence of skin cancer has risen in Australia – from 1982 to 2007 diagnoses of melanoma increased by around 50%. From 1998 to 2007, GP consultations to treat non-melanoma skin cancer increased by 14%.



Non-melanoma skin cancer is the most common type of skin cancer. This type of skin cancer is more common in men, with almost double the incidence compared to women. More than 434,000 people are treated for one or more non-melanoma skin cancers in Australia each year.

Excluding non-melanoma skin cancer, melanoma is the third most common cancer in both Australian women and men, and the most common cancer in Australians aged 15–44 years. The five-year relative survival rate for melanoma is 90% for Australian men and 94% for Australian women.

Skin Cancer Awareness Week (November 17–23) reminds us that we need to protect ourselves from the sun, and not just when we go to the beach. New findings from the Cancer Council National Sun Protection Survey show that Australians are at the same risk of being sunburnt at sporting venues as they are at the beach. The research shows a clear link between sporting venues and sun damage, with 22% of Australians at sports grounds and centres getting sunburnt. Richie Benaud has recently revealed he is undergoing radiation therapy for skin cancer which he attributes to playing and watching cricket without a hat or sunscreen.

The well-known 'Slip, Slop, Slap' campaign, initiated some 35 years ago has been recognised internationally as a remarkably effective public health strategy. The campaign has more recently been modified to 'Slip, Slop, Slap, Seek and Slide' (referring to seeking shade and sliding on sunglasses).

However, the baby boomer generation and Australians born pre-World War II had little or no knowledge of this message in their teenage years when getting sunburnt was considered a rite of passage and a tan was a sign of good health.

Skin cancer (including both melanoma and non-melanoma) is the most common cancer in Australia, with melanoma the most deadly. But other skin cancers can also be malignant and cause painful and disfiguring lesions. New therapies are now available to treat pre-cancerous solar keratoses – more commonly known as sunspots. These spots are usually small, scaly or wart-like and appear most commonly on parts of the face such as the nose the cheeks, upper lip, temples and forehead as well as the back of the hands and forearms.

It's important to get to know your own skin and identify sun damage. A first step is to check with your doctor or pharmacist if you have doubts about any changes either in skin appearance or in the colour of moles and freckles. Useful information, advice and tools are also available through the website www.knowyourownskin.com.au.

Your local pharmacy is your health destination. You can get more advice on choosing the most appropriate sunscreen and how to be sun smart this summer.

From pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's Self Care health information, you can access the *Sense in the Sun* Fact Card.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to www.psa.org.au 'Supporting practice' then 'Self Care', and then 'Find a Self Care pharmacy'.