



Stop deaths, and compensation claims

Make sun protection a priority at work

When we head to the beach or send our kids to their sports carnivals, sun protection is a priority. The sun doesn't disappear when we go to work, so should sun protection also be a priority during work hours or when we're out on the road? With skin cancer being preventable, employers paying millions in sun-related workers compensation, and sun damage still misunderstood, it seems the answer is yes.

Dying makes no sense

UV (ultraviolet) radiation is a known carcinogen and a major cause of **skin cancer** in Australia. By the age of 70, two in three Australians will be diagnosed with skin cancer.

But 95% of skin cancers could be prevented with good sun protection.

Under state Occupational Health and Safety laws, employers must ensure their employees can work safely and without risk to their health. This includes exposure to **UV radiation**. In turn, employees have a responsibility for their own safety and health and must follow UV protection policies and use sun protective measures provided.

And, employers paid out \$63 million in almost 2000 sun exposure-related workers compensation claims from 2000-2012.

So, there are good reasons for employers and workers to make sun protection at work a **priority**.

Providing and using sun protective clothing, sunglasses, sunscreen and hats is no different from wearing safety boots, hard hats or gloves to prevent workplace injury.

It's not just farmers

Working **outdoors** increases your skin cancer risk by up to 10 times. And with skin cancer risk directly related to time spent in the sun – in other words, the more you are exposed to UV radiation, the higher your risk – anybody working outdoors should take sun protection measures.

Unsurprisingly, farmers and construction workers are the occupations most exposed to UV radiation. However, heavy vehicle drivers rank fourth, indicating sun protection should also be a priority for people who spend significant time behind the wheel as part of their job, particularly as UV radiation can penetrate glass and the **average vehicle side window** only blocks about 20 per cent of UV.



So, sun protection is also required in the car. SunSmart recommends installing UV protective **window tinting** or film where vehicles are used for work. Keep in mind though that the quality of the film, not the darkness, is the key to protecting against UV, with glass treated with a UV-absorbing window film blocking **almost all** UV.



Image provided by TMAA

It's also a good idea to keep a hat in the vehicle, for periods when workers have to leave the vehicle, and sunscreen should be stored below 30 degrees to maintain its effectiveness, so the glove compartment is not ideal.

While glare and UV are not the same thing, surfaces that are highly reflective also reflect UV, such as the surface of the road. So sunglasses are also a good addition to the PPE toolkit, both for reducing UV exposure and preventing eye damage.

"It's also worth keeping in mind that UV is highest in the middle of the day, which is often not the hottest part of the day," SunSmart's Heather Walker explains. "Heat tends to peak later in the afternoon whereas UV will always peak in the middle of the day when the sun is highest in the sky. So it's worth considering trying to schedule outdoor activities or driving outside of those peak UV times."

Protecting workers

As part of their OHS responsibilities to provide a safe working environment, employers should:

- have a UV protection policy or written guidelines documenting control measures, which are endorsed by senior management
- provide information, instruction and training about UV radiation to workers
- provide UV protection control measures in line with occupational hazard controls, such as shade, rescheduling outdoor work and providing PPE (broad-brimmed hats, sunglasses, sunscreen), shade and sun-protective clothing
- implement a monitoring and review process to determine the effectiveness of control measures and identify changes that may further reduce exposure.

Employees must co-operate with their workplace's efforts to minimise over-exposure to UV to ensure their own health and safety, and that of others.

Source: sunsmart.com.au

How to be sun smart at work

Many workplaces are proactive about sun protection, having a sun protection policy and supplying sunscreen. Good occupational sun protection measures include:

- providing and maintaining equipment needed to protect workers from the sun, including long-sleeved shirts with collar and long pants, sunscreen, sunglasses and a broad-brimmed hat
- if possible, reduce the amount of time workers spend in the sun or schedule outdoor tasks away from peak UV in the middle of the day.
- having a sun protection policy, which includes education for workers and is 'visible' around the workplace, for example through signage and toolbox talks.



Image provided by TMAA

Heather Walker recommends tailoring sun protection policies to your workplace and the sun exposure risks your workers face. The best way to ensure your policy is relevant, and to get worker buy-in and engagement, is to consult workers.

Cancer Council has a sample SunSmart policy and best practice guide available for employers, and can provide training and education in most states and territories, which may include a Skin Damage Viewer device that shows hidden UV damage to the skin.

Heather Walker also recommends employers clarify their legal obligations, research the risks for their specific industry, encourage employees to check skin regularly, and consider an implementation budget for signage, training and PPE, "so it's not just a policy that sits on the shelf".

Six sun protection myths

The riskiest time is when it's hottest: Heat tends to peak in the mid-afternoon, but UV radiation peaks in the middle of the day, so limit UV exposure around lunchtime where possible.



I don't need sun protection when it's cloudy: We can't see or feel UV radiation. Cloud will not always block UV; sometimes it can increase it. If you're often working outdoors, you need sun protection, every day, all year-round, regardless of the temperature.



The damage is done: It is never too late to protect yourself from UV damage. Taking sun protection measures now will reduce your risk of skin cancer.



My vehicle will protect me: Glass cannot block out all UV radiation. Sun protection is needed for people whose work involves driving.



Tans are healthy: A tan is a sign of UV damage.



Sunscreen is all I need: Sunscreen won't give you full protection from UV and needs to be reapplied every two hours, so it should be used along with clothing, hats, sunglasses and shade.



Source: sunsmart.com.au, cancer.org.au

"We've heard of cases where the employer wants to provide long pants and long sleeves and employees feel that it would be too hot and uncomfortable," she said. "That's the kind of thing you can avoid by consulting and forming a group with representatives from across the organisation to guide your approach with sun protection and make sure people are on-board."

"Providing and using sun protective clothing, sunglasses, sunscreen and hats is no different from wearing safety boots, hard hats or gloves to prevent workplace injury."

"The answer won't be the same for each workplace so it is important to tailor it to the needs of your workforce and the work they do. In some workplaces, it might be possible to schedule work outside of peak UV, in others it might not be, so how do you minimise that risk in a reasonable way within the constraints you're dealing with?"

"If someone within the organisation has had a skin cancer experience, sharing that kind of **personal story** can be a really powerful wakeup call as well."

"We find a lot of the time people tend to worry about sunburn but not necessarily about skin cancer. They think about the immediate effects, not the longer-term effects, and no one ever thinks it's going to happen to them. Sunburn is painful, but equally UV could kill you."

"UV is a recognised carcinogen and hazard in the workplace. Sun protection can slip to the bottom of the list because it's not an immediate threat such as falling off a ladder or being run over by a car. You can't always see the immediate effects of UV damage, so it's not necessarily front of mind."

"But there is something we can do about reducing the harm from UV, and it's never too late to take steps to prevent skin cancer. It's really about employers taking their duty of care seriously and employees understanding this is something they have the power to do something about."



SunSmart at **Cancer Council Victoria** and the **Cancer Council** in each state can help organisations meet their sun protection duty of care by providing advice, training and **resources** for your workplace.