

Be aware: sun can blind workers to skin cancer threat

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As the UK is in the midst of a heatwave, a leading body for workplace safety and health has alerted employers and outdoor workers to the very real health dangers of getting sunburn.

The Institution of Occupational Safety and Health ([IOSH](#)) warns that sun exposure causes 99% of non-melanoma skin cancer and up to 65% of malignant melanoma skin cancer – and yet vulnerable outside workers, particularly those employed in construction, agriculture, maritime industries, road working and rural occupations remain ignorant of the dangers.

For example, research into sun exposure in the UK construction sector, commissioned by IOSH from Nottingham University, showed that two thirds of those working outside for an average of seven hours a day either thought they were not at risk or didn't know whether they were or not. Nearly 60% of construction workers reported having sunburn at least once in the past year, while 40% thought there was no need to wear sunscreen on a cloudy day (up to 80% of UV rays can penetrate clouds).

Most of those surveyed said they didn't take measures to protect themselves against sun exposure and neither workers or managers saw sun safety as a critical issue, mainly due to the misperception that the UK climate doesn't pose a high risk of skin cancer.

Other research, commissioned by IOSH from Imperial College London, found that around 50 people die each year in the UK from skin cancer caused by sun exposure at work, with 240 new cancer cases being registered annually.

"The majority of those affected are men and just under half of those diagnosed with malignant melanoma linked to sun exposure at work are under 65, findings which are echoed in studies around the world, including North America, Australia and Europe," said Ruth Wilkinson, Head of Health and Safety at IOSH.

"At least 1,500 new cases of work-related non-melanoma skin cancer (more treatable than malignant

melanoma) are also registered each year in Britain, with 12 deaths,” she added.

Between two and three million non-melanoma skin cancers and 132,000 melanoma skin cancers occur globally each year. One in every three cancers diagnosed is a skin cancer.

As well as sunburn, Ultraviolet (UV) exposure can also cause premature aging of the skin, a range of vision-impairing eye conditions and weakening of the immune system.

“This heatwave maybe perfectly timed for a holiday but the reality is that the risks to sun-protected holiday-makers aren’t comparable to the risks faced by millions of outdoor workers, who for significant periods of the year are typically exposed to solar radiation for hours at a time, day in, day out,” added Ruth Wilkinson.

“It should also be born in mind that these workers often have long term, chronic solar radiation exposure to particular areas of the body, such as their head, neck, arms and hands, with legs and torso also being exposed on particularly hot days.

“The fact remains that in some industry sectors, the risks still aren’t acknowledged or managed as well as they could be.”

How to manage it

Here’s an IOSH Checklist to help manage outdoor workers’ exposure to the sun – 90% of skin cancer deaths could be prevented if exposure to UV is controlled:

Be sure to check the Ultraviolet (UV) index from the weather forecast and communicate information to relevant workers

Try to minimise exposure to direct sunlight until at least 3pm, if possible

Regularly swap job tasks between workers to ensure everyone in the team can spend some time in the shade

Erect heavy duty outdoor cover or shade – shade can cut UV exposure by 50-plus%

Make sure rest breaks are taken in shaded areas or indoors

Encourage the wearing of long-sleeved, loose-fitting tops and trousers when working outside during months with high UV levels

Wear wide-brimmed hats that shade the face, head, ears and neck, or where safety helmets are worn, use those fitted with ‘Legionnaire-style’ neck flaps

Wear sunglasses with 100% UV protection or use UV-filtering safety goggles with the same level of protection if the work requires physical eye protection

Don’t rely on sunscreen alone for protection

Encourage workers to regularly check their skin for changes such as moles or other skin differences. Detecting the early signs of skin cancer and undergoing early treatment can save lives.