



# Skin Cancer and Outdoor Workers

Guidance for safety representatives

## **Background**

Skin cancer is the most common type of cancer in the UK. The main cause is excessive exposure to the sun's harmful ultra violet (UV) radiation. There are around 100,000 new cases every year. 8000 of these cases are the most serious form, malignant melanoma, and these figures are rising fast. The number of men getting malignant melanoma had gone up five fold in the last 25 years, and the number of women being diagnosed has gone up threefold in the same period.

Around 2,000 people a year die as a result of skin cancer. It is impossible to say how many of these cases are a result of exposure to the sun at work, but it is becoming much more common in people who work outdoors.

The skin is damaged if a person burns or spends too long in the sun. Although fair-skinned or freckled people are more likely to burn, too much exposure can damage anyone's skin and increase their chance of developing cancer.

## **The Law**

The Health and Safety at Work Act makes it clear that there is a legal duty on every employer to ensure, as far as reasonably practical, the health of their employees.

It also says that employers must provide "information, instruction, training and supervision" to ensure their safety.

The Management of Health and Work Regulations also require the employer do conduct a suitable risk assessment of the risks to the health of their workforce. That includes the risks from UV radiation.

The law also says that an employer has to remove any risk, or if that is not possible look at other ways of preventing or reducing exposure, including, as a last result protective equipment. Where protective equipment is required this must be supplied free.

Many outdoor workers, in particular agricultural workers may be employed through agencies. Where this happens both the agency and the employer will have a legal duty to protect the worker.

## **Preventing skin cancer**

The TUC believes that no person should be exposed to anything that can cause cancer during their work and that employers have a duty to ensure that they remove the risk. That applies just as much to excessive sun exposure as dangerous chemicals.

It is estimated that 90% of all skin cancer deaths could be prevented if people properly controlled their exposure to the sun's UV radiation. Employers have always argued that they cannot control exposure to the sun and that it is up to

individual workers what they wear. They also claim that it is unfair and impractical to ask workers to cover up in very hot weather. This is not true. In practice there is a lot employers can do, but measures must be introduced with the full involvement of safety representatives.

Simply telling workers they must cover up or wear sunscreen is not going to be effective in itself unless there is also a campaign to explain the dangers to the workforce, however many employers have been successful in reducing exposure by looking at the working practices rather than that just putting the responsibility on the worker.

Among things employers can do to reduce the risk are:

- Changing working practices so that less outside work needs to be done either in the hottest months or the hottest time of the day (11:00-15:00). Often it is possible to organise work in summer so that the tasks that require the employees to be outside can be done either in the mornings or late afternoon, or on cloudy days.
- Provide canopies, sheeting, or similar covering over open areas such as building sites where people are working. Also provide shaded areas from breaks
- Provide information and guidance on avoiding exposure to harmful UV radiation both as part of induction and on an on-going basis. The Health and Safety Executive has produced a useful leaflet giving advice on outdoor worker and sun protection (see information and resources). Given the high proportion of outdoor workers who are recent migrants consideration should be given to ensuring that training information and advice is available in other languages.
- Make sure that any protective clothing is lightweight, long-sleeved and comfortable, but at the same time dense enough to prevent UV rays from getting through. It should also allow body heat to escape. This will encourage workers to wear it.
- Provide lightweight brimmed hats for all outdoor workers.
- Where work is required to be done outdoors in sunny weather, employers should provide dispensers with sunscreen and workers should be encouraged to apply it regularly on any exposed areas. Sunscreen should have a sun protection factor of at least 20 and preferably 30 but also give protection against UVA radiation (some don't). Workers should be given a choice of sunscreens where possible.

These measures will be most effective if the workforce are involved in the decisions, in particular on types of clothing and sun-screen provided. The

arguments for change must be given in a way that shows that these measures are intended to help keep employees healthy and prevent cancer.

Some kinds of skin cancer are easily treated and all types are less likely to be fatal if treated early on, Employers should be encouraged to provide occupational health screening programmes which should include checking for the signs of skin cancer. Outdoor workers should also be given information on how to recognise the early signs of skin cancer.

### **What safety reps should do.**

Often it will be safety representatives who first raise the issue of protection against the sun, but regardless of where the idea comes from, any programme aimed at reducing exposure to UV radiation is going to be more successful if safety representatives are involved.

The involvement of safety representatives will help ensure that the measures introduced, including the kinds of protection, are suitable and more likely to be adopted by the workers. They will also be able to ensure that all the issues are understood by the workforce. Ideally safety representatives will discuss the issue with the union members before any measures are introduced. Once the issues are explained most safety representatives have found that the workforce will embrace change, although, like the use of hard hats in construction, it may not happen overnight.

Safety representatives can also circulate material on the risks of skin cancers from the websites of organisations such as Cancer Research UK or the HSE. Some unions have also produced material aimed at outdoor workers.

Employers may expect safety representatives to help enforce any instructions on covering up or wearing sunscreen. This is not a safety representative's role. While they can lead by example, they are not there to police the safety system. If employees are ignoring safety advice it is usually for a reason. Where workers continue to work without tops, hats and sunscreen on the hottest days then perhaps what has been provided is just not suitable or there has not been enough training on the issue.

Where a safety representative raises concerns over the risk of skin damage by the sun, and the employer refuses to act, then they should notify their union. In some cases it may be helpful to contact the enforcing authority (either the HSE or local authority) and ask them to ensure that the employer complies with their legal obligations.

### **Other issues**

Working outdoors in hot weather can do more than just damage the skin. Outdoor workers exposed to high temperatures for long periods are at risk from sunstroke, sunburn, and heat exhaustion. Sun or heat stroke is more likely when

heavy physical work is being done.

To avoid these effects then many of the same measures to prevent skin cancer also apply. Working at the hottest times of the day should be avoided or kept short, clothing, including protective clothing, should not be tight and restricting, and should allow body heat to escape; plenty of rest periods in a cool place should be taken; and cool, clean water should be provided for frequent drinks. It is important to replace water lost through sweating. Employers should always provide a regular supply of fresh water for all outdoor workers.

### **Further information and resources**

The TUC website contains information on all aspects of health and safety including cancers and skin protection. [www.tuc.org.uk/healthandsafety](http://www.tuc.org.uk/healthandsafety)

The HSE website has a lot of information on outdoor working and hot weather at [www.hse.gov.uk/temperature](http://www.hse.gov.uk/temperature)

Cancer Research UK have very useful information on skin cancer and also run the “SunSmart” campaign, aimed at encouraging people to take precautions in the sun. Their site is at [www.cancerresearchuk.org](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org) The SunSmart campaign is at [www.cancerresearchuk.org/sunsmart](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/sunsmart)