

Sun protection at beaches and swimming pools



Ultraviolet radiation (UVR)

Too much UVR from the sun causes skin damage and sunburn to exposed skin, and increases the risk of developing melanoma and other forms of skin cancer later in life.

The Cancer Society advises protection from the sun when the Ultraviolet Index (UVI), which measures the level of UVR in the environment, is 3 or above. Peak UVR times are between September and April, especially between 10am and 4pm.

Why is sun protection at beaches and swimming pools particularly important?

- In New Zealand, people involved in activities around water are more likely to be sunburned.¹
- At beaches and swimming pools, people often have large areas of skin exposed to the sun.
- People go more often to beaches and swimming pools on sunny days during the daylight saving months. This is the time of year when the UVR levels are highest and the risk of sunburn is greatest.
- People often spend a long time at the beach or pool, and if shade is not available, they can be in the sun for a long period.
- Many surfaces reflect UVR. This means that as well as UVR from the sky, your skin will be burnt from UVR reflected from the pool water, concrete, and surf.²

- Many children spend time at beaches and swimming pools. Children are particularly at risk from too much UVR because sunburn, especially in childhood, is a risk factor for melanoma. Preventing sunburn may help reduce melanoma risk and skin damage.

Ways to protect yourself

Plan the time of the trip to decrease UVR exposure

UVR levels are highest between 10am and 4pm. Avoid this peak UVR time by going to the beach or pool early in the morning or late in the day to decrease the amount of UVR you exposed to.

Use shade

Go to beaches and pools that have shade. If no shade is available, take your own portable sun umbrella.

Choose swimsuits that provide UVR protection

Swimsuits can leave a lot of skin exposed to the sun, particularly on areas like the neck, back, shoulders and arms, which are often burned.

When buying a swimsuit, avoid bikinis or swimsuits with large areas cut away. The more coverage around the shoulder and arm area, the better. For boys, longer swimming shorts are better than lycra briefs.

If possible, especially for young children, choose a Lycra rash suit for swimming, as these are designed to provide sun protection which covers the body including the upper thighs and the upper arms. Rash suits and vests are ideal as they are designed to be used in the water and also dry quickly, providing continued protection. It is also safer to wear a rash suit or vest rather than T-shirts in the water.

Darker, denser fabrics are best

When choosing swimsuits, darker fabrics with a dense weave offer the most protection from the sun. Tightly woven fabrics give better protection than loosely woven ones. When wet, the amount of UVR protection of many fabrics changes, so choose dark colours and tightly woven fabrics. If you are not going to change into a dry garment after use, choose clothing made from a fast-drying fabric.

When out of the water

Ensure you cover up with a shirt, towel and sunhat, or sit in the shade and use sunscreen. Discourage sunbathing or unnecessary exposure to the sun.

Children

Ensure children are protected from UVR when they are in and out of the water. Use shade whenever possible, and protect with clothing which is usually the most convenient. Hats can also be worn when paddling or playing in water.

Reapply sunscreen

Use a broad spectrum, SPF30+, water-resistant sunscreen that complies with the joint AS/NZS2604:1998 Standard. Apply 15 minutes before going into the water. Zinc cream on nose, lips, cheeks and tips of the ears gives extra protection. Reapply sunscreen to dry skin after swimming and at least two-hourly after that.

Protect your eyes

A legionnaire, broad-brimmed (minimum 7.5 cm brim) or bucket (minimum 6 cm brim) hat provides significant protection for the eyes, and children should be encouraged to wear one while playing outside. Around highly reflective surfaces (water, sand and snow), sunglasses should be worn if practical. If sunglasses are worn, they should conform to the AS/NZS1067:2003 sunglass standard.

The Ultraviolet Index (UVI)

The UVI is an international, scientific measure of the level of UVR in the environment. The higher the number, the greater the risk of skin damage.

The Cancer Society advises **sun protection between September and April (especially between 10am and 4pm)**, or when the UVI is 3 or higher. Cover up with a hat and protective clothing; wear sunglasses if possible; and use sunscreen on exposed skin.

Check out the Sun Protection Alert on the Met Service website: www.metservice.com or in the weather section of your daily newspaper. The Sun Protection Alert includes local real time advice.

References

- 1 Horsburgh-McLeod, G, Reeder, A. McGee.R., & Gray, A. (2010). Sunburn in a New Zealand urban population, 1994–2006. Poster presented at the AEA Annual Scientific Meeting 2009, August, Otago University, Dunedin, NZ. *Australian Epidemiologist*, 2009, 16(2),44.
- 2 Greenwood, J. S., Soulos, G. P., & Thomas, N. D. (1998). *Undercover: Guidelines for shade planning and design*. Sydney: NSW Cancer Council and NSW Health Department. Adapted for New Zealand use by the Cancer Society of New Zealand, 2000, from http://www.cancernz.org.nz/assets/files/docs/info/Informationsheets/Guidelines_Under_Cover.pdf