How does the sun damage our skin?

The sun produces Ultraviolet Radiation (UVR) and two types reach the earth's surface – UVA and UVB. Both UVA and UVB are now known to cause skin cancer.

UVA over-exposure results in early ageing and skin cancer
UVB is the most harmful, causing burning and skin cancer

Remember! Tanned skin, not just sunburnt skin, is damaged skin.
A tan is a sign that damaged skin is trying to protect itself from the sun's ultraviolet rays. And even when you have a suntan, you can still get sunburn.

Skin cancer

There are two main types of skin cancer:

Non-Melanoma Skin Cancer:
This type of skin cancer is the most common and is very curable.

Look out for:
- A new growth or sore that does not heal within four weeks
- A spot or sore that continues to itch, hurt, crust, scab or bleed
- Constant skin ulcers that are not explained by other causes.

Malignant Melanoma:
This is the most serious type of skin cancer but it is also the most rare. It most often appears as a changing mole or freckle. If it is discovered and treated early many cases can be cured.

Look out for:
- Changes in the colour, shape or size of moles or freckles.

Many skin changes will be harmless, but if you notice anything unusual, you should visit your doctor.

The Irish Cancer Society is the national charity for cancer care. Funded entirely by donations from the public, its work is dedicated to eliminating cancer as a major health problem and improving the lives of those living with cancer through patient care, research and education.

Skin Protection Tips

If you would like further information about skin cancer, another cancer, or cancer in general, the Society provides a Cancer Information Service (CIS):

National Cancer Helpline
Freefone
1800 200 700

offers access to high quality confidential information, support and advice about cancer prevention, early detection, and treatment.

Any queries can also be emailed to:

helpline@irishcancer.ie

These services operate weekdays from 9am to 5pm, and every Tuesday 9am to 9pm

Sun Smart

The Irish Cancer Society. We're just trying to save your skin.
Prevent skin cancer by taking care in the sun

SOME FACTS:
- Skin cancer is by far the most common cancer in Ireland amongst both men and women.
- There are approximately 5,600 new cases of skin cancer diagnosed in Ireland every year.
- One in every six men and one in every six women will develop skin cancer by the age of 74 years.
- 80-90% of skin cancers are caused by the sun’s ultraviolet (UV) rays and can be prevented.
- About 80 – 85% of UV rays can pass through clouds so you need to take care on cloudy days too.
- Damage to the skin by the sun is permanent. It also builds up - that means damage to the skin in one year is added to damage done in previous years. In later life this can lead to skin cancer.
- It is therefore necessary to protect ourselves so that we can enjoy the sun without damaging our skin.

Who is at risk?
Everyone who spends time outdoors is at risk - not just those who sunbathe.

In particular, people who spend a lot of time working or playing outdoors have a higher risk of getting skin cancer and need to protect their skin.

TAKE EXTRA CARE IF YOU:
- Have pale or freckled skin that doesn’t tan or burns before it tans.
- Have naturally red or fair hair and blue, green or grey eyes.
- Have a large number of moles (50 or more).
- Burn easily, have a history of sunburn or have already had skin cancer.

Who is at risk?
Everyone who spends time outdoors is at risk – not just those who sunbathe.

In particular, people who spend a lot of time working or playing outdoors have a higher risk of getting skin cancer and need to protect their skin.

TAKE EXTRA CARE IF YOU:
- Have pale or freckled skin that doesn’t tan or burns before it tans.
- Have naturally red or fair hair and blue, green or grey eyes.
- Have a large number of moles (50 or more).
- Burn easily, have a history of sunburn or have already had skin cancer.

How to be SunSmart!

COVER UP
- Wear a wide-brimmed hat or a hat with a neck flap to protect your neck.
- Wear a t-shirt or other shirt with a close-weave material.

USE SUNSCREEN
- Use sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) 15 or higher.
- Make sure it has UVA and UVB protection.
- Put sunscreen on 20 minutes before going out in the sun.
- Use lots of sunscreen and reapply every two hours (more often if you have been swimming or sweating).

SEEK SHADE
- Avoid being out in the sun between 11am and 3pm.
- Use sun umbrellas and other types of shade to protect you from the sun.

PROTECT YOUR EYES
- Wear sunglasses that give a high protection against UV rays. Look at the label and check the standard: BS Standard (BS 27 24 19 87) or European Standard (EN 1836).

SunSmart kids!
Children spend more time outdoors and get an average of 3 times more sunrays than adults. Because of this, over a lifetime most people will get 80% of their exposure to the sun in their youth and only 20% as an adult.

Severe sunburn in childhood increases the risk of developing skin cancer later in life.
- Children’s skin is very sensitive to the sun’s rays. All children, whether they tan easily or not, should always be protected.
- Babies under the age of six months should be protected from the sun at all times. Ideally they should be kept in the shade as much as possible. Infant sunscreen should only be used if necessary and you should do a patch test before using it.
- Keep older children safe by following the SunSmart Code.
- If possible, use a child’s sunscreen and patch test first.

Facts about sunscreen
- Always check that your sunscreen protects against both UVA and UVB rays (also known as “broad spectrum”).
- For the best UVA protection your sunscreen should be labelled 5 stars or “high”.
- The higher the Sun Protection Factor (SPF), the greater protection provided against UVB rays, a SPF above 15 gives high protection.
- However, wearing sunscreen does not mean that you can stay out in the sun longer than recommended – it offers some protection, but should be used with cover-up clothing.
- It is very important to apply sunscreen thickly and evenly. Most people get a lot less protection than they think because they do not put enough sunscreen on their skin.
- Remember! Those parts of the body that are not usually exposed to the sun will tend to burn more easily.
- Also, take extra care of ears, neck, bald patches, hands and feet.

UV Index/Sunburn Index
How can the solar UV index help me to protect myself?
The solar UV Index is used internationally to describe the level of ultraviolet radiation at the earth’s surface.
- It ranges from zero to 11+. The higher the value, the greater the possibility of damage to your skin and eyes.
- The solar UV index helps people decide the type of sun protection to use.
- Met Eireann’s UV Index outlines the risk for those with fair skin that burns easily and places the risk into categories of Low; Medium; High and Very High during the period of May-September.
- When High or Very High the solar UV Index is also included on Met Eireann’s national radio, TV and newspaper forecast.
- Always check this forecast so that you know how best to protect yourself.

UV Index
- Low risk
- Medium risk
- High risk
- Very high risk
- Extreme risk