

Sun protection in the snow

Most Australians are aware of the dangers of ultraviolet (UV) radiation during summer. However, winter activities such as snow skiing pose a high risk of sunburn because UV radiation is more severe in alpine regions than at sea level; up to one quarter more severe at altitudes of 2,000 metres. In addition, snow is very efficient at reflecting (rather than absorbing) UV radiation. Depending on the age of the snow, around 50 to 90 per cent of UV radiation is reflected, which puts areas such as the chin and nose tip at increased risk of sunburn.

General suggestions

General suggestions include:

- Remember that UV radiation is at its peak between the hours of 10am and 3pm.
- Don't be fooled by cold and cloudy days - you can still get sunburnt. The earth's atmosphere gets increasingly thinner the higher above sea level you go, so always cover up with clothing, sunglasses and sunscreen.
- A balaclava will keep your head warm and reduce the risk of sun exposure.
- If you don't want to wear a balaclava, consider a beanie. Pull it down over your ears to reduce the need for sunscreen.

Apply sunscreen

Suggestions include:

- All exposed areas of skin should be covered in waterproof, broad spectrum SPF 30+ sunscreen.
- Apply sunscreen about 20 minutes before venturing outside to allow absorption time.
- Remember to cover easily overlooked areas including the chin, throat, ears and backs of the hands.
- Take sunscreen in your bag and reapply regularly.

Protect your eyes

'Snow blindness' (photokeratitis) is sunburn damage to the cornea of the eye caused by UV radiation. This painful condition can be associated with temporary vision loss for up to 48 hours. It is thought that UV exposure may contribute to other eye conditions including cataracts, pterygium and age-related macular degeneration. Suggestions on protecting your eyes include:

- Always wear wraparound sunglasses or goggles. Aim for a snug fit, so that sunlight can't shine over the top or sides of your eyewear.
- Choose eyewear that meets the Australian Standard AS1067. This means that the glasses will block 95 per cent of UV radiation.
- Yellow or brown tinted lenses are more effective at counteracting the 'blue' glare on snow.
- Sunglasses and goggles can be fitted with prescription lenses, if necessary. See your optometrist for more information.
- Brimmed hats can block at least half of UV radiation from reaching the eyes.

Protect your children

Don't forget that children need as much sun protection in alpine regions as you do. Suggestions include:

- Instil good habits early. If you protect your child from a young age, they will learn to be sunsmart by example.
- Apply sunscreen to your children too. Many companies produce sensitive skin formulas suitable for children.
- Toddlers are great imitators, and are more likely to wear their sunglasses if you lead by example and wear yours.

- Make sure you buy sunglasses that meet the Australian Standard AS1067.
- Sunglasses for children should have plastic instead of glass lenses for safety reasons.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Chemist
- Optometrist
- SunSmart, Cancer Council Victoria Tel. 131 120

Things to remember

- Ultraviolet (UV) radiation is more severe in alpine regions than at sea level.
- Cover up with clothing, and apply broad spectrum SPF 30+ sunscreen to all exposed areas of skin.
- Wear sunglasses or goggles that meet the Australian Standard AS1067 to protect your eyes from the damaging effects of UV radiation.

Want to know more?

For references, related links and support group information, go to More information.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Cancer Council Victoria

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