



Skin Cancer (Melanoma)

Introduction

Exposure to ultraviolet light radiating from the sun is the main cause of skin cancers in New Zealand. Workers on farms have a high risk of getting skin cancers because of the large amount of outside work involved. Even on cloudy days the solar ultraviolet radiation level may be sufficient to be harmful.

Skin Cancers

Skin cancers take different forms:

- Melanoma, which is the least common but most dangerous form, and can be fatal;
- Basal cell carcinoma (BCC), which is the most common form but least dangerous skin cancer, is usually found on the face and neck;
- Squamous cell carcinoma (SCC), which is less common but more dangerous than BCC can occur on the lips.
- Solar keratosis (sunspots) are not usually cancerous but are an indicator of solar ultraviolet radiation exposure.

Melanoma?

- Melanoma is a skin cancer for which New Zealand has one of the highest rates in the world.
- It is the most common cancer in people aged 20-39.
- It causes the death of around 200 New Zealanders each year.

Who is Likely to Get Skin Cancer, Particularly Melanoma?

Melanoma is not common among darker skinned people, but all people of European ancestry with fair skin are at risk.

Babies and young children may be more sensitive to the sun than adults. Some research indicates that sun damage in the first 15 years of life can increase the risk of melanoma in later life.

The people most at risk are those:

- With fair skin.
- With a family history of melanoma.
- Who have had melanoma in the past.
- With unusual moles or freckles that have an irregular shape and are multicoloured.
- Who have been severely sunburned in the past are also at greater risk.

Warning Signs

In its early stages, a skin cancer usually looks like a normal freckle but, unlike a normal freckle, it grows and changes – often quickly.

The most important things to look for in a freckle are:

- Change in size, especially if the freckle grows larger.
- Change in colour, especially if it becomes tan, brown, black and a mixture of red, white, blue or the colour spreads from the edge into the skin around it.
- Change in shape, especially if the freckle becomes an irregular shape.

- Change in height, especially if the freckle used to be flat and grows higher.
- Change in sensation, especially if the freckle itches, is tender or painful.
- Change in the surrounding skin, especially if it becomes red, swollen or if colour blemishes develop next to the freckle.
- Change in surface, especially if the freckle becomes scaly, ulcerated or bleeds.

Exposure Level

An assessment should be made of the solar ultraviolet radiation to which people are likely to be exposed. This should include identification of the tasks with the time of the day they are carried out and the period involved. The greatest risk occurs during the summer daylight saving months, between 11 am and 4 pm.

Other factors that may influence exposure to solar ultraviolet radiation should also be identified. These may include the shade provided by the working environment, reflective surfaces such as water, snow or bright building surfaces.

Level of Protection Required

To protect yourself and your children against melanoma in the future, follow these guidelines and use common sense when out in the sun:

- Protect yourself from sunburn.
- Seek shade during the middle part of the day and early afternoon (11 am - 4 pm).
- Use clothing such as hats, long-sleeved shirts and pants to protect your skin.
- Use a broad spectrum sunscreen (SPF 30 or greater) on any skin which is not protected with clothing.
- Take special care on windy and cloudy days. Although you remain cool, you can still burn.
- Sunglasses should be worn to protect your eyes from the sun.

Health Monitoring

Check your skin every few months, in particular, those areas that are most often exposed to the sun, i.e. face,

lips, ears, neck, shoulders, arms and hands. Early diagnosis and treatment is the key. Over 90% of cases can be cured if the disease is caught early.

Carry out your self-assessment by standing undressed in front of a mirror and carefully looking at all your skin. If appropriate, have someone else assist you. Remember the soles of your feet, between your toes and the palms of your hands.

If you spot something suspicious, make an appointment to see your doctor, quickly.

Don't put it off. If it is melanoma or another form of skin cancer it won't go away on its own. Any delay could be dangerous. If diagnosed in the early stages, the treatment of melanoma is almost always successful.

Delay in having treatment leads to people dying from this disease. Consult your doctor if you detect a spot which looks different from the other spots around it or a spot that has changed colour, shape or size in the last few months.

Have You Assessed the Critical Factors for Melanoma on the Critical Factors Chart?

- Level of protection required
- Level of exposure
- Health monitoring

References

Further information is contained in:

- Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992.
- *Guidelines for the Provision of Safety, Health and Accommodation in Agriculture*, available from OSH.
- *Farm Health and Safety Manual*, available from Federated Farmers.
- *Guidance Notes for the Protection of Workers from Solar Ultraviolet Radiation*, available from OSH.
- *Critical Factors Chart* issued by OSH. (A guide for farmers to manage hazards in the workplace.)