



School children too exposed to summer sun

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A ground breaking new study high lights the need for our children to be much better protected from the sun while at school.

Total daily UV doses were found to be higher on weekdays compared to the weekend, indicating the importance of SunSmart school programmes. Wearing a hat was the most common summer sun protection strategy used by the primary school children who participated in the University of Otago study. The Sun Study, funded by the Cancer Society of NZ, measured the sun exposure and sun-related knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of 488 Year 4 and Year 8 schoolchildren in five different regions around NZ.

Children were asked to wear an electronic UV monitor that recorded their sun exposure and to fill in an activity diary for one week. They also completed a questionnaire covering a range of sun exposure questions.

The study involved collaboration between Dr Tony Reeder (Social and Behavioural Research and Cancer Group) and Dr Brian Cox (Hugh Adam Epidemiology Unit) at the University of Otago, and Dr Greg Bodeker and Dr Richard McKenzie at the National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research (NIWA), to create a unique team. University of Otago PhD student, Caradee Wright, was awarded National Research Foundation of South Africa and University of Otago scholarships to conduct the study. Together, Ms Wright and Vanessa Hammond, also a public health student at the University of Otago, visited 27 schools.

Analyses of the data, assisted by bio-statistician Andrew Gray from the Department of Preventive and Social Medicine, showed that although girls among the older age group knew more about sun protection than boys, their sun protection behaviour was less protective than that of the younger boys and girls. In contrast, protective behaviour was more common among the older boys. Older children were more likely to express positive attitudes towards a suntan than younger children.

Overall, sun-related knowledge and behaviour were more likely to be positive when attitudes towards a suntan were not positive, a potentially useful finding for future skin cancer prevention / sun protection health promotion interventions.

Ms Wright said 'when we looked at total daily sun exposure, we found that children in Northern regions and older children got higher UV doses. Interestingly, total daily UV

doses were higher on weekdays compared to the weekend, indicating the importance of school programmes. Passive outdoor pursuits, such as sunbathing and reading, were associated with higher UV exposures than active pursuits.'

The findings were presented at the NIWA UV Radiation and its Effects: an update (2006) Workshop in Dunedin. Further results will be presented at the American Society for Photobiology Annual Meeting in Puerto Rico in July.

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