NZ WOMEN AT GREATEST MELANOMA RISK WORLDWIDE

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If you're a woman living in New Zealand, your chances of getting the deadliest form of skin cancer known as melanoma are higher than anywhere else in the world – even though these cancers are largely preventable.

The shocking statistic was revealed in data collated throughout the 1990s and published by the Cancer Council of South Australia comparing the annual incidence of melanoma per 100,000 of population around the world.

Put together with a new World Health Organization (WHO) report, that estimates that up to 60,000 deaths a year worldwide are caused by too much exposure to UVR, the impact of melanoma is "truly scary", says SunSmart spokesperson Wendy Billingsley.

Of the 60,000 deaths recorded in the WHO report, Global Burden of Disease of Solar Radiation, an estimated 48,000 are caused by malignant melanomas, and 12,000 by skin carcinomas.

"New Zealand women have more chance of getting a melanoma than even women in Australia. The chances are that for every 100,000, nearly 40 will get the killer cancer compared with 28.44 in Australia and fewer than 11 in Northern Europe and eight in North America."

The numbers in the UK, Germany, Southern Europe, Eastern Europe and Central and South America range from 7.8 to 2.5 whereas in most Asian countries, fewer than 1 woman in 100,000 is likely to have a melanoma.

New Zealand men are not much better off, the figures show. At just under 33 cases per 100,000 of population, New Zealand men are only just behind Australian men (at the nearly 37 per 100,000).

"Combining the two genders, Australians and New Zealanders are neck and neck at the top of the risk chart with around 32 people in 100,000 compared with just over 10 people in the next region at risk, Northern Europe.

"It's an appalling result particularly in light of the WHO report, which emphasises much Ultraviolet Radiation (UVR) related illness and death can be avoided through a series of simple prevention measures," Ms Billingsley says.

The WHO report says UVR from the sun causes a considerable global disease burden including specific cancer.

In New Zealand alone, there are an estimated 50,000 or more new cases of skin canceri and over 300 deaths each year

“The WHO report says that in total, more than 1.5 million DALYs (disability-adjusted life years) a measure of the loss of full functioning due to disease and death are lost every year to excessive UVR exposure,” Ms Billingsley says.

The report is the first systemic examination of the global health burden due to UVR and investigates nine adverse health outcomes from excess UVR exposure.

The main three, which cause the greatest burden of disease from UVR, are cutaneous malignant melanomas, and non-melanoma skin cancers developing in different cell layers of the skin (squamous cell carcinomas and basal cell carcinomas).

In addition, UVR causes sunburn, skin photo-ageing, cortical cataracts, pterygium (a fleshy growth on the surface of the eye), reactivation of herpes of the lip (cold sores) and the rare squamous cell carcinomas of the eye.

Doctor Maria Neira, director for Public Health and the environment at WHO said, “This global assessment of the health risks of UVR provides a good basis for public health action. We all need some sun, but too much can be dangerous and even deadly. Fortunately, diseases from UV such as malignant melanoma are largely preventable through simple protective measures.”

The report notes that UVR does have beneficial effects, mainly in the production of vitamin D which prevents the development of bone diseases such as rickets, osteomalicia and osteoporosis.

“While some exposure to UVR is beneficial more research is required in this area. We do agree with the WHO that in most cases minimal casual exposure to UVR should be sufficient to maintain Vitamin D levels at a range that avoids these health problems,” Ms Billingsley says.

The SunSmart partnership of HSC and the Cancer Society says a few easy-to-implement sun safety measures could prevent much of the cancer and other death and disease burden due to UV radiation, including:

- Limit time in the sun, particularly though the middle of the day during daylight savings hours
- Use shade wisely: seek shade when UV rays are most intense
- Wear protective clothing including hats and sunglasses

- When other means of protection are not possible, use a broad-spectrum sunscreen of sun protection factor 30+
- Avoid sunlamps and tanning parlours; for youth under the age of 18, WHO recommends that they do not use them at all
- Know the UV Index: when the UV Index predicts radiation levels of 6 or above appropriate sun safety practices should be taken
- Protect children from the sun

For further information:

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[i] O'Dea D. *The Costs of Skin Cancer to New Zealand*. Wellington: Cancer Society of New Zealand, 2000.