

# Older Australians at risk of sun-related skin cancer death

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A new Western Australian study has revealed the mortality from non-melanoma skin cancer (NMSC), commonly considered less dangerous than melanoma, is affecting older Australians at a worrying rate.

Researchers at the Western Australian Institute for Medical Research (WAIMR) found West Australians above the age of 69, especially men, accounted for 70 percent of deaths from non-melanoma skin cancer in WA, and most primary cancers occurred in areas of high sun exposure.

The study has prompted health experts to urge older people to stay vigilant about sun protection and get regular skin checks.

The Cancer Council WA Director of Education and Research and co-author of the paper, Terry Slevin, said the study's results should act as a strong reminder for older West Australians to check their skin and see their doctor at the first sign of anything suspicious.

“Older people may have become blasé about NMSC because for the most part they can just be cut out, but as this research shows, NMSC is serious and can be deadly if left untreated,” he said.

“It's important people understand that NMSCs are preventable from middle age – it's wrong to think all the damage to our skin is done in childhood and nothing can be done after that to avoid skin cancer.”

The research published in the most recent edition of *Cancer Causes*

Control, found 70 percent of deaths from NMSC occurred among people aged 70 years and over. More than 70 per cent of those were men, and in most cases the primary cancer developed on the face, ears, hands or scalp.

“These results should be a stark reminder for older people, especially blokes, that they should be more vigilant in having their skin checked and do something if they notice any changes in their skin,” Mr Slevin said.

“The message these findings send us is that it’s never too late to prevent skin cancer and regular skin checks are important to catch skin cancers early, before they become a problem.”

Each year in Western Australia, it's estimated that around 30,000 non-melanoma skin cancers are removed and there are 37 deaths from these types of cancers.

Author of the paper, WAIMR Associate Professor Lin Fritschi, said the research was the first definitive evidence that deaths from NMSC in Australia was primarily caused by cancer resulting from excessive sun exposure.

“The average age of death caused by NMSC was about 77 years old, and most primary cancers appeared in areas of high sun exposure – for men, the scalp was the primary cancer site in a quarter of these deadly cancer cases,” she said.

“These cancers can mostly be prevented by applying the ‘slip, slop, slap’ rule and early detection.

“There could be a number of reasons why older people are not picking up these cancers early enough such as poor eyesight and less mobility to

check their own skin, illness or dementia.

“In light of these findings, skin cancer examinations really need to become a high priority for older people as well as their GPs, nurses and carers.”

The research found no deaths recorded from basal cell carcinoma (BCC), one of the most common NMSCs, or solar keratosis. Most deaths were associated with squamous cell carcinoma and Merkel cell carcinoma.

Source: Research Australia

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