

## Call to make young people more aware of skin cancer risk

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Urgent action is needed to make young people in Scotland more aware of the risk of skin cancer, a leading researcher has claimed.

Dr Richard Kyle from the University of Stirling led a study looking at the sun-related behaviours of around 2,200 children, aged 12 and 13, living around Glasgow.

He said that most of those surveyed were unaware of the link between sun exposure and cancer risk – and one in five reported suffering sunburn on more than one occasion. Experts say higher incidences of sunburn in childhood can lead to skin cancer in later life.

Dr Kyle said: "Just two weeks ago, Scotland's acting Chief Medical Officer reported that an increasing number of people across Scotland are being diagnosed with skin cancer.

"If we are to reverse this rise our research shows that we need to take urgent action to educate young people about the dangers of the sun and increase awareness of the signs of skin cancer. Encouraging young people to stay safe in the sun by using sunscreen, covering up and knowing the cancer symptoms to look out for will set up healthy habits for the rest of their lives."

The study, developed in association with Bangor University and the Teenage Cancer Trust, was funded by the Teenage Cancer Trust and the Scottish Government Detect Cancer Early Programme. It has just been published on the *BMJ Open* website.

It is the first piece of research to look at sun-related behaviours and tanning attitudes amongst Scottish adolescents. The research found that:

- Half of the young people surveyed reported getting sunburnt the previous summer (51 per cent) – and over a third of these were sunburnt more than once (38 per cent). This equates to 1 in 5 young people getting sunburnt more than once.
- Most those surveyed did not know the common signs and risk factors for skin cancer: less than half (45 per cent) recognised "change in the appearance of a mole" as a cancer warning sign and only 39 per cent agreed that "getting sunburnt more than once as a child" was a cancer risk factor.

- Girls were statistically significantly more likely to report sunbathing, use of oils to aid tanning, and sunburn – but also statistically significantly more likely to know that change in the appearance of a mole was a skin cancer symptom and that getting sunburnt more than once as a child was a risk factor for skin cancer. This confirms previous research that girls adopt riskier sun related behaviours despite greater awareness of skin cancer-related risk.
- Nearly a fifth of the respondents (17 per cent) reported that they 'didn't usually use sunscreen'. And of those who did use sunscreen – more than half did not know the Sun Protection Factor of the product they were using.
- One in 20 of the 12 and 13-year-olds surveyed (6 per cent) stated that they had used a sunbed in the past 12 months. This is significant because use of sunbeds among under 18s is banned in Scotland by law. This may be use in private homes, when abroad or signal unscrupulous practises by sunbed owners. The survey didn't identify locations.
- Around two-thirds (61 per cent) of the children surveyed reported getting a suntan last summer and four in ten (42 per cent) of those surveyed reported sunbathing regularly last summer to try to get a tan.
- Nearly half of those responding (42 per cent) agreed that most of their friends thought that a suntan was a good thing; 26 per cent said that they thought their family thought that a suntan was a good thing.

Dr Kyle, a lecturer at the University's School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health in Inverness, concluded: "Young people's awareness of skin cancer symptoms and risk factors was low and matched by poor sun protection behaviours, most apparent in the high prevalence of often severe sunburn during the previous summer.

"If we want to halt the continuing rise of malignant melanoma in Scotland, we need to do much more to raise awareness of skin cancer and promote better behaviours in the sun by our young people. This may include commissioning more research to see how we can do that.

"Hopefully, by publishing and promoting this research we may reach out to families to encourage youngsters to change their behaviour."

Dawn Crosby, Teenage Cancer Trust Head of Services and Policy in Scotland said: "Young people in Scotland deserve to be educated about the dangers of burning their skin. We must teach them how to protect their skin in the sun, and schools must make sun safety a priority.

"Through our partnership with Detect Cancer Early we are working to improve the diagnosis experience of young people with cancer in Scotland. We also hope to increase the reach of our pioneering education programme and demonstrate its significant value for Scottish young people and their families."

Alex Neil, Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing, said: "I am concerned by the findings of this study, which appear to show a degree of ignorance of the danger of sunburn and sunbed use, and the importance of looking out for the signs of [skin cancer](#). It's crucial that people listen and act on the health advice to be safe in the sun.

"For the Scottish Government Detect Cancer Early Programme's social marketing campaigns to be most effective, it is important that the target audience is reached in as many ways as possible. That is why our programme is engaging with and supporting the Teenage Cancer Trust schools education programme. Breaking down barriers and getting people to talk about cancer is an important part of the Detect Cancer Early programme.

"The longer term opportunities are exciting as [young people](#) become more at ease discussing cancer and take with them an increased awareness, knowledge and understanding of cancer into their adult lives, resulting in a change in presentation behaviour, earlier diagnosis and improved survival chances.

**More information:** "Scottish adolescents' sun-related behaviours, tanning attitudes and associations with skin cancer awareness: a cross-sectional study." Richard G Kyle, Iona MacMillan, Liz Forbat, Richard D Neal, Ronan E O'Carroll, Sally Haw, Gill Hubbard. *BMJ Open* 2014;4:5 e005137 [DOI: 10.1136/bmjopen-2014-005137](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2014-005137)

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