

Skin cancer risks higher for soldiers serving abroad

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Soldiers deployed to tropical and sunny climates are coming home with increased risk factors for a threat far from the battlefield: skin cancer.

In a retrospective study of about 200 veterans seen at the post-deployment clinic of the Tennessee Valley Healthcare System of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, researchers from Vanderbilt University Medical Center and the Tennessee Valley Healthcare System found that 62 percent of [military personnel](#) reported getting sunburned while deployed abroad, including cases of skin blistering. In addition, 29 percent noted a change in the color, shape or size of their moles (a skin cancer risk factor) since being deployed to tropical zones, but only 4 percent reported receiving a skin examination from a physician since deployment.

"The past decade of United States combat missions, including operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, have occurred at a more equatorial latitude than the mean center of the United States population, increasing the potential for ultraviolet irradiance and the development of skin cancer," said Jennifer Powers, M.D., assistant professor of Medicine in the Division of Dermatology and lead researcher on the study.

Powers presented the results at the World Congress on Cancers of the Skin, held recently in Edinburgh, Scotland.

The study also found that only 22 percent of military personnel were made very aware of the risks of [sun exposure](#), and while 77 percent

reported being exposed to bright sunlight for more than four hours a day while working, only 27 percent had regular access to sunscreen. Just under one-third of respondents (32 percent) reported having no access to sunscreen at all while working.

Previous research cited in the literature shows that 34 percent of United States military veterans who developed melanoma had also been deployed to tropical climates. In comparison, only 6 percent of non-military melanoma patients had spent time in tropical climates.

Melanoma claims 9,700 lives in the United States each year.

While military personnel deployed overseas may often have survival priorities other than avoiding sun exposure, Powers notes that the study indicates a potential deficiency for access to sun protection that could translate to long-term health risks.

"This study demonstrates room for improvement for [skin cancer](#) prevention and early detection in the military population, including possible screening of higher-risk personnel," she said.

Provided by Vanderbilt University Medical Center

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