

Study delivers mixed news on skin cancer rates

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South Australians living in coastal and agricultural areas have up to a 31 per cent higher chance of developing the most common cancer in Australia, according to a University of South Australia study published in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* today.

The UniSA study is the first to systematically document non-melanoma

skin cancers (NMSC) in the State, revealing that people living on the Eyre and Yorke Peninsulas and coastal regions are 23-31 per cent more likely than metropolitan residents of developing NMSCs.

Between July 2010 and December 2014, about 77,500 South Australians were treated for NMSCs – otherwise known as keratinocyte cancers – says UniSA researcher Pam Adelson from the Rosemary Bryant AO Research Centre.

Forty per cent had more than one non-melanoma skin cancer removed, with men (59.2 per cent) and people from coastal and agricultural regions more likely to be treated, although women were more proactive in seeing a doctor for suspicious skin lesions.

"Non-melanoma skin cancers are the most common cancers in South Australia by a long way and represent the second highest cost of all cancers in the country behind colorectal cancer," says Adelson.

"While they are not as aggressive as melanoma and are more easily treated if identified early, squamous cell carcinomas – which make up about 30 per cent of NMSCs – can potentially spread to other parts of the body." About 600 people died of NMSCs in Australia in 2014.

The most recent figures from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) estimate that non-melanoma skin cancers cost the Australian health sector \$367 million each year, with colorectal cancers topping the list at \$427 million, and prostate, Non-Hodgkin lymphoma, leukemia and breast cancer all behind NMSCs in terms of healthcare costs.

The researchers used Medicare data to assess the number of people treated for NMSCs in South Australia between 2010 and 2014, noting a 59 per cent increase in services for non-melanoma skin cancers since

2000.

While high, South Australian NMSC rates are still lower than the national average, with Queensland and NSW topping the country in terms of skin cancer. Victoria and Tasmania have the lowest incidence.

Adelson says the data shows that younger people are far less likely to have NHMS, reflecting 40 years of consistent messaging about the dangers of sun exposure.

"A lot of the damage is done in people's youth, which is the reason why approximately two thirds of Australians experience at least one non-melanoma skin [cancer](#) before 70 years of age.

People are also living longer and so we can expect the numbers being treated to increase in coming years."

Adelson says the study findings will help primary health care providers target populations at risk and reinforce preventative advice such as self-[skin](#) examinations every 12 months.

Provided by University of South Australia

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