

Researcher shines light on effectiveness of school sunscreen legislation

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States that enacted laws permitting children to carry and apply sunscreen at school experienced an increased interest in sun protection and a higher rate of sunscreen use among adolescents, according to new research by a University of Massachusetts Amherst resource economist.

Brandyn Churchill, assistant professor of resource economics at UMass Amherst, is co-author of a study that is the first to examine state-level "SUNucate" laws, which permit students to apply [sunscreen](#) at school and wear sun-protective clothing even if it does not conform to school dress codes. In some cases, the laws also include health class curricula on skin cancer prevention.

The paper, "State SUNucate Laws, the popularity of Google Searches for Terms Related to Sun Protection, and Youth Sunscreen Use," is published in the journal *Health Behavior and Policy Review*.

"These policies are effective at increasing awareness about [sun protection](#) and use of sunscreen, with no discernable downside," Churchill says.

Because the federal Food and Drug Administration considers sunscreen an over-the-counter drug, many states have prohibited students from carrying and applying sunscreen in school as part of broader medication bans. In these states, students wishing to use sunscreen at school might have to obtain a note from a physician and apply it in front of a school nurse.

To overcome this barrier, the American Society for Dermatologic Surgery Association assembled a coalition of more than 50 stakeholders, crafting model SUNucate legislation to create a specific exception for sunscreen use in schools. The number of states that have adopted policies based on the model language has grown from one in 2013 to 27 this year.

Churchill and his co-authors find SUNucate laws are associated with increased Google searches related to sun protection. For example, search popularity for "sunscreen" increased by an average of 27.2% in states that enacted SUNucate laws compared to [states](#) without them.

In addition, the legislation is linked to an 8.3% increase in sunscreen use by [high school students](#), based on self-reported results in the national Youth Risk Behavior Survey.

"The increase appears to be led by populations that typically are not large sunscreen users," Churchill says. "What we see in the data is that it's the white boys and non-white girls who seem to be driving this effect—groups that historically had lower rates of sunscreen use."

SUNucate laws eliminate the ambiguity of whether students are allowed to apply sunscreen at school, policies that may vary by school district or even from school to [school](#).

"These laws provide clarity to students, parents and educators," Churchill says. "For legislators, they carry a low cost to enact and are relatively uncontroversial. This seems to be one of the bipartisan issues for the time: Kids should use sunscreen."

Churchill collaborated on the research with Christopher S. Carpenter and Michelle Marcus of Vanderbilt University and Dr. Mary-Margaret Chren of Vanderbilt University Medical Center.

More information: Christopher S. Carpenter et al, State SUNucate Laws, the Popularity of Google Searches for Terms Related to Sun Protection, and Youth Sunscreen Use, *Health Behavior and Policy Review* (2023). [DOI: 10.14485/HBPR.10.4.1](https://doi.org/10.14485/HBPR.10.4.1)
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