

UN report warns that working in the sun causes skin cancers

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New data from two United Nations agencies shows that millions of workers toiling under the sun's glare is fueling skin cancer cases around the world.

Nearly 1 in 3 deaths from non-melanoma [skin](#) cancer is caused by [occupational exposure](#) to the sun's ultraviolet rays, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) announced on Wednesday.

"Unprotected exposure to solar [ultraviolet radiation](#) at work is a major cause of occupational skin cancer," [Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus](#), WHO Director-General, said in a [news release](#) on the report. "But there are effective solutions to protect workers from the sun's harmful rays, and prevent their deadly effects."

The data, also published in the journal [Environmental International](#), would mean occupational ultraviolet radiation exposure is the third largest occupational carcinogen, trailing only asbestos and silica dust.

Ultraviolet radiation from sunlight is a known risk factor for skin cancers, according to the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). And the WHO's International Agency for Research on Cancer [recognizes](#) solar radiation as a Group 1 carcinogen.

"A safe and healthy working environment is a fundamental right at work," ILO Director-General [Gilbert Hounou](#) said in the news release. "Death caused by unprotected exposure to solar ultraviolet radiation while working is largely preventable through cost-effective measures. It is urgent that governments, employers and workers and their representatives work together in a framework of well-defined rights, responsibilities and duties to reduce the occupational risk of UV exposure. This can save thousands of lives every year."

The researchers noted the report attempts to measure the full scale of skin cancer cases around the world.

"It's actually a really big deal, because it's the first estimates of work-

related skin cancer that we have globally," study lead author [Frank Pega](#), an epidemiologist at WHO, told *CNN*.

According to Pega, it took seven years to collect and assess enough data to arrive at the new estimates.

In the study, his team examined cases of workplace exposure to solar radiation and non-melanoma skin cancer cases across nearly 200 countries.

What did the evidence show? In 2019, 1.6 billion workers were exposed to ultraviolet radiation while at work. That amounted to nearly 30% of all working-age people, occurring often in industries like agriculture, construction and fishing. While males and [young adults](#) were most exposed, the overall number of people exposed did drop 32% from 2000 to 2019.

Still, the number of skin cancer deaths linked to occupational solar radiation climbed about 90% during that same period. Workplace UV radiation exposure caused 18,960 deaths from non-melanoma skin cancer in 2019, the report found.

Many workers exposed to [solar radiation](#) work without an employer, Pega added, earning income from collecting recycling materials or working in outdoor markets. People who work around reflective surfaces, like fishermen surrounded by water, are also at an increased risk of skin cancer.

Previous WHO [estimates](#) have found that occupational exposure to UV [radiation](#) increases the odds of developing non-melanoma skin cancer by 60%.

Fortunately, there are ways to lower that risk, Pega said. For example,

employers might shift hours for outdoor workers away from peak sunlight times.

Companies could also provide shade for outdoor workers, and labor laws could require protective clothing. Sunscreen doesn't hurt either, Pega added.

Pega also urged improved access to early screening for skin cancer.

Last but not least, countries could add skin [cancer](#) from occupational sunlight exposure to national lists of workplace diseases, because that would allow affected employees to be eligible for workers' compensation, Pega added.

"It's a real shift in thinking," he said. "Occupational health systems will really have to adapt."

More information: Visit the Cancer Council for more on [solar radiation exposure at work](#).

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