

Young people and sun protection

Summary findings of qualitative investigations of attitudes towards the sun, sun protection and skin cancer among young people and mothers of young children.

1. Background Methods and Sample

Researchers at Strathclyde University were contracted by Cancer Research UK to conduct qualitative research among young people to investigate their attitudes towards the sun, sun protection and skin cancer. The research was undertaken in June/July 2003.

Twelve moderated focus groups were conducted with up to 8 respondents in each group, as follows:

- Mothers aged 25-35 with one or two children aged 2-6 years (4 groups; all female)
- Teenagers living at home aged 12-13 years (2 groups; 1 male, 1 female)
- Teenagers living at home aged 16-17 years (2 groups; 1 male, 1 female)
- Young adults living at home aged 21-24 years (2 groups; 1 male, 1 female)
- Young adults living independently aged 21-24 years (2 groups; 1 male, 1 female).

The sample was recruited with a bias towards C2DE social class groups, and was geographically spread across England.

Findings and recommendations contained in this report are derived solely from this investigation.

2. Conclusions

- The potential long-term risk of skin cancer is of limited interest to young people.
- Young people are more motivated to avoid the potential short-term negative effects of over exposure to the sun, particularly sunburn (which may cause embarrassment, discomfort, and disruption to holiday enjoyment).
- Tanning is extremely desirable.
- Safer tanning advice is the only message likely to be accepted by dedicated tanners.
- Skin ageing and skin damage caused by the sun is of concern to young women and has the potential to motivate behavior change.
- Young people are more likely to consider sun protection when travelling abroad, but less likely to think of it in the UK.
- The use of factor 15+ sunscreen is really the only sun protection message which young people are willing to consider/adopt.
- There is a general lack of knowledge among young people about the correct and effective use of sunscreen.
- Fake tanning is viewed as a credible alternative to sunbeds but not to sunbathing.
- Mothers typically take responsibility for sun protection for the whole family. In regard to their children, mothers are generally receptive to sun protection advice.

3. Summary findings and recommendations

3.1 Skin cancer knowledge

There is widespread awareness and general acceptance of the link between sun exposure and skin cancer. It is also recognised that skin cancer rates have increased over recent years. Young people however are generally surprised that skin cancer is one of the most common cancers and that cumulative episodes of intense sun exposure increases the risk of developing skin cancer in later life. These latter two health messages have potential to grab the attention of young people but are unlikely to be effective communication strategies on their own. Health messages could however be used successfully as secondary reinforcement information.

3.2 Mole awareness

Young people are generally receptive to the issue of mole awareness in relation to skin cancer and can see merit in the observation and identification of mole changes. Concern about a mole/moles is cited as a reason for modification of sun exposure and sunbed use. The issue of suspicious moles has the potential to attract the attention of those most resistant to sun protective messages, such as independent males and those employed in manual, outdoor occupations.

“I think showing you how a mole can change, that’s a wake up call. You start to think, ‘I wonder if any of my moles are changing’.”

(Female 25-35, ABC1)

“The only thing that made me think today is the stuff you showed us on moles.”

(Male 21-24 C2DE)

Young people have very limited knowledge of the types of mole changes or skin growths to look out for. Information on key signs and symptoms could be a valuable strategy. Although unsightly graphic images of malignancies should be avoided as they are likely to trigger denial and discourage self referral.

3.3 Sunburn

Overwhelmingly, the primary motivation for young people to adopt sun protective behaviours is to avoid the potential negative short-term effects of over exposure – particularly sunburn which can cause discomfort, embarrassment and disruption to holiday enjoyment.

“It can actually spoil your holiday. So some of these messages like keep yourself comfortable are as important as maybe the skin cancer itself.”

(Female 21-24 C2DE)

“I was totally embarrassed about it... but I know better now”.

(Male 21-24 C2DE)

“If you go to the likes of the Algarve and you get burnt on day 2, you’ve got another 5 or 6 days of hell.”

(Male 21-24 C2DE)

Burning is extremely undesirable and communication strategies with young people are likely to be most effective if they focus on the promotion of sun protection as a way of avoiding negative outcomes associated with burning. Skin cancer risks, whilst acknowledged have little salience on a day-to-day basis.

“Skin cancers’ the last thing I’m thinking about”

(Male 16-17 ABC1)

3.4 Tanning

Tanning is extremely desirable. It is associated with health, attractiveness and self esteem. The financial investment in a holiday also focuses the need to acquire a tan. The possibility of peer ridicule may even make young people ‘afraid’ to return from holiday without a tan. Messages which attempt to position tanning as undesirable are likely to fall on deaf ears and should be avoided.

“It makes you feel more confident – you feel better, I feel slimmer when I’ve got a tan”.

(Female 21-24 C2DE)

“If you have been on holiday you want to show you’ve got a tan”.

(Female, 21-24 C2DE)

3.5 Cosmetic skin damage

Cosmetic skin damage caused by UV exposure is of concern to young women and has potential to trigger positive behaviour change. The proposition that sunbathing and tanning accelerates skin aging and can cause permanent blemishes/sunspots has some credence and could be a useful motivating strategy.

“It does age you – dries your skin out”.

(Female 25-35 C2DE)

Skin aging is also strongly associated with sunbed use.

“These women who do a lot of these sunbeds, their skin gets a leathery look to it and they actually do wrinkle a lot more”.

(Female 25-35 C2DE)

3.6 Fake tanning

Fake tanning is viewed by young women as a credible alternative to sunbeds. It is not however seen as a realistic alternative to natural tanning as it does not encompass the perceived additional pleasures of sunbathing.

3.7 Safer tanning advice

‘Safer-tanning’ advice is likely to be the only message that dedicated sunbathers will accept. Inexperienced holiday makers travelling abroad for the first time and those who base their choice of holiday on the expectation of obtaining a tan are important potential targets for a safer-tanning message.

“I used to think it was blocking the sun so I didn’t want it on – but it doesn’t. It helps it”.

(Female 25-35 C2DE)

“I think they need to let people know you can still tan wearing sun creams. Yeah it protects you while you tan”.

Safer tanning messages will need to be counter-balanced with information on the cumulative and irreparable effects of tanning and the associated health risks.

3.8 Factor 15+ sunscreen

Whilst there is widespread acknowledgement of international sun protective messages (including those of Cancer Research UK’s SunSmart campaign), there is very little acceptance and behavioral compliance.

People go on holiday, they’re not going to waste 4 hours staying in. You’re wasting part of your day

(Females 21-24 C2DE)

“You can’t cover up if you want to get a tan!”

(Female 16-17 C2DE)

“I wouldn’t wear one (broad brimmed hat). You’d get laughed off the beach.”

(Female 16-17 C2DE)

The only recommendations with any real salience among young people are those of: ‘avoid burning’, ‘taking extra care of children’ and factor 15+ sunscreen. The recommendation most likely to generate movement towards desirable behaviour change is the use of factor 15+ sunscreen. There is a general lack of knowledge surrounding the use of sunscreen e.g. when to apply, how much to apply and how often to repeat applications. Issues of cost also need to be addressed/ require clarification as the perceived expense of sunscreens discourages their use. Practical information and tips around these issues could form the basis of a factor 15+ campaign.

“Never used factor 15 – I didn’t know it went any higher than 12 actually!”

(Male 21-24 C2DE)

“I use a high one (factor) for the first few days but then go down to 10 or 8.”

(Female 16-17 C2DE)

“I thought it worked immediately!”

(Female 25-35 C2DE)

3.9 Sun protection in the UK

Most young people travelling to hot destinations will take some form of sun protection, e.g. purchase sunscreen. Fewer are likely to consider sun protection in the UK and admit to the purchase of sunscreen in response to sunburn. Strategies to encourage young people to be better prepared at home should be considered.

“The only time I really use it (sun cream) is when I go on holiday – that’s when you tend to buy it.”

(Female 25-35 C2DE)

"You don't think you'll burn here... but you do."

(Female 25-35 C2DE)

"I had it really bad. I never even noticed it but someone said to me, 'look at the state of your shoulders'. It was cloudy."

(Female 25-35 C2DE)

"If I feel like I'm burning I'll put it on (sunscreen)"

(Female 16 – 17 C2DE)

"With sun tan cream – you'd definitely use it if you get burnt, but before then you probably wouldn't."

(Male 21-24 D2DE)

3.10 Independent teenage holiday makers

Young people become more ambivalent towards sun protection as they progress through their teenage years and into their twenties. Those traveling abroad independently of their parents for the first time (particularly males) are least likely to employ sun protection measures. Consequently encouraging younger teens to assume greater responsibility for their own sun protection may be an effective strategy to instill good long-term sun protective habits.

Sunscreen products designed specifically for young teens; or communication via schools in the form of curriculum guidance and school policies have potential to reach this audience. Holiday companies could provide a useful means of reaching older teens and independents at the point of 'greatest risk'.

3.11 Mothers/guardians

Mothers typically assume responsibility for family sun protection and are generally very receptive to sun protection messages and advice. First-time mothers are particularly responsive to sun protection messages and strategies aimed at this group could be very effective. Information and advice about taking a child abroad for the first time is likely to be of particular interest.

"You just want to protect them. They've got 35 all over them."

(Female 23-35 C2DE)

Messages presented to mothers in the form of 'hints and tips' in a typical magazine style are likely to have most salience, whilst didactic messages may be ignored as patronising.

Mothers, and indeed fathers, often apply different (lower) standards to their own sun protection than they do for their children. There is scope for encouraging parents and guardians as role models.

"More so for children. I always tend to put suntan cream on them."

(Female 23-35 C2DE)

"If I didn't have the kids to look after it would be good – you could just lie out."

(Female 23-35 C2DE)