

School Systems: The Importance of Promoting and Providing Sun Protection!

There are many strategies school facility administrators and teaching staff employ to protect students and themselves from health hazards. Fire escape plans, earthquake and fire drills, asbestos elimination, closed campuses, and removal of dangerous playground equipment represent but a few methods utilized to protect health and well being. Yet too often staff forgets to adequately safeguard young people and themselves from harmful ultraviolet (UV) rays found in sunlight. This oversight persists despite the sun's dominant, daily presence in the sky.

The growing imperative to increase student participation in physical activity, often occurring outdoors, should be coupled with support for sun-safety practices. Thus reduction of risk for conditions like juvenile-onset obesity and diabetes will not simply be replaced by increased likelihood for another chronic disease: skin cancer. School systems can integrate sun safety by:

- 1) Incorporating sun-protection instruction in their teaching plans.
- 2) Adopting sun-safety guidelines for all outdoor activities.
- 3) Providing more campus shade cover (trees and structures).
- 4) Teacher and staff modeling of sun-safety behaviors.
- 5) Educating and encouraging parents to support student sun-safety behaviors.
- 6) Posting signage that reminds teachers and students to practice sun safety.

The Skin Cancer Prevention Program (SCPP), within the California Department of Public Health (CDPH), has education and policy materials to assist school systems to integrate sun-safety instruction and practices into their daily operation. Many such items are available via the sun-protection website maintained by CDPH: www.AvoidSkinCancer.com. (Note especially the "Schools" section listed under "Resources.") For more information, contact SCPP at (916) 449-5393 or by E-mail at andrew.manthe@cdph.ca.gov.

It is important to understand why and how to protect both young and old from solar assault! Please review the following skin cancer prevention facts and tips:

- Sunlight causes 90 percent of non-melanoma skin cancers. Unprotected exposure to UV rays in sunlight also produces blistering sunburns, premature aging (wrinkles and blotches), a weakened immune system, and cataracts (a loss of transparency in the lens of the eye that results in cloudy vision or blindness).
- Skin cancer is now considered EPIDEMIC by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This disease persists since contact with sunlight seems inevitable. Currently one in five people can expect to get skin cancer in his or her lifetime.
- Solar radiation (including UV rays) is now classified as a "known human carcinogen." Thus UV rays have formally joined the ranks of known cancer-causing elements like arsenic, asbestos, radon, and tobacco smoke.

- There are more new cases of skin cancer each year in California than the total new cases of the next 12 cancer sites combined, including cancers of the breast, prostate, lung, and colon! Experts expect over one million new cases of skin cancer in the United States during 2007.
- A child's skin, particularly before age ten, is especially vulnerable to UV rays. **Childhood sunburns** increase a child's risk of developing skin cancer as an adult. Even a suntan is harmful. **Sunburns and tanning** are actually outward signs of internal skin damage.
- Up to 50 percent of lifetime sun exposure occurs in pre-adulthood, at least for children who engage in indoor occupations as adults.
- From mid-spring through mid-fall, between 10 a.m. and 4.p.m., outdoor play and work areas can be likened to a radiation chamber due to intense solar rays.
- UV rays linked to skin cancer development are more intense (destructive) under certain time frames or conditions:
 1. from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
 2. with lack of thick cloud cover
 3. from mid-spring through mid-fall
 4. at higher altitudes
- Promotion and modeling of sun-safety behaviors within structured environments, like schools, will influence young people to practice sun protection during non-school hours.
- Recognizing the generally understood link between sun exposure and the ever-increasing number of skin cancer cases, it is vitally important for administrators of schools and other programs that provide outdoor activities for children to adopt and implement sun-protection instruction and guidelines (or policies), and provide sufficient campus shade cover.

SUN SAFETY TIPS

- Wear a wide-brimmed hat (at least 4-inch brim) or a baseball-type hat with back and side flaps that produces a shadow that covers the face and neck.
- Wear tightly woven, loose-fitting clothing that covers as much of the body as possible.
- Reduce sun exposure from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., when UV rays are strongest.
- Find shade (trees, physical structures) to shield you, especially from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
- Use sunglasses that include a warranty stating that they provide 100 percent UVA and UVB (broad-spectrum) protection.
- Liberally apply sunscreen to exposed skin 15 minutes before going outdoors. The sunscreen container should indicate a sun protection factor (SPF) rating of 30 or greater and should state that it provides broad-spectrum (UVA and UVB) protection. Depending on outdoor conditions, sunscreen should be reapplied at least every two hours.

WARNING! Do not depend on sunscreen alone to protect children and adults from skin cancer. Instead, put into practice a combination of the above recommendations.

- To test for possible allergic reaction, apply sunscreen on a small patch of skin, such as the underside of the forearm, to see if any irritation develops within the subsequent 24 hours.