

Research reveals scale of skin cancer among outdoor workers

The number of people in the UK diagnosed with or dying from the deadliest form of skin cancer because of sun exposure at work is revealed in the findings of a new study published today.

Commissioned by the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH), the research has given businesses the first full picture of the skin cancer burden on those working outdoors in industries as diverse as construction, agriculture and leisure and entertainment.

It is estimated malignant melanoma kills nearly 50 people each year in the UK because of exposure to solar radiation at work, with 240 new cases being registered, according to the research by Imperial College London.

Combining the findings with a recent study by Imperial College into work-related non-melanoma skin cancer nationwide, we now know as many as **five people a day** on average in the UK are being diagnosed with a form of skin cancer contracted at work.

Publication of the study, at a cross-industry event in London today, came as a separate research project commissioned by IOSH found a lack of awareness of the risks of solar, or ultraviolet, radiation (UVR) in the industry hardest hit by the disease.

The University of Nottingham research into work attitudes to sun safety in the construction sector found that two thirds of construction workers outside for an average of nearly seven hours a day thought they were not at risk or were unsure if they were.

More than half (59 per cent) of those questioned by researchers reported having sunburn – a major contributor to skin cancer – at least once in the last year.

Researchers also found a ‘macho culture’ in some parts of the industry and misconceptions about the threat of UVR in climates like the UK’s – cloud cover does not give total protection from solar radiation.

The studies’ findings, published as part of IOSH’s *No Time to Lose* campaign to beat work-related cancers, brought a call for increased awareness of skin cancer risks at work and the launch by the Chartered body of new guidance for employers on how to protect their workers.

Businesses are being urged to develop ‘sun safety strategies’ that include regular updates on the UV index from weather forecasts, minimising sun exposure in the middle of the day and asking employees to wear long-sleeved, loose-fitting tops and trousers. Using high-factor sunscreen is helpful but should not be relied on as the only barrier to the harmful rays, employers are advised.

IOSH executive director of policy Shelley Frost said: “We’ve a clear picture for the UK now of the number of people diagnosed with or dying from skin cancer because of sun exposure at work.

“It’s a terrible disease but with some simple measures we can ensure people who work outside are not exposed to the solar radiation that causes it. Work-related skin cancer is avoidable but businesses and their employees hold the key to beating it and today we are showing them how it can be done.”

The research team at Imperial College London examined skin cancer registrations in different industries, comparing their incidence in outdoor workers to people working indoors.

Dr Lesley Rushton, who led the study by Imperial College, said: “Our study is the first to quantify the importance of sun exposure during work time with an estimated one person a week likely to die because of this. It highlights the need for industry to introduce skin protection measures and encourage their workers to use them.”

In the UK, it is estimated that 5.5 million people have been exposed to solar radiation through their work – in the service industries, construction sector, manufacturing and agriculture. Latency for the disease varies – melanoma is the most common cause of cancer among young adults.

Father-of-two Peter Jackson, 59, contracted malignant melanoma because of exposure to solar radiation during his time as an RAF weapons technician in his 20s and 30s. He said: “I had no idea whatsoever the damage the sun would do and yes, on occasion, I did get burnt. Reddening was part of the process to getting a tan. It was part of the culture. Every waking moment, it was a competition to get the best tan.

“It never occurred to me that I would be at risk. I had no worries whatsoever and exposed myself to the sun at the time. I didn’t know, I wasn’t told of the risks associated with it.”

The studies’ findings and new guidance for businesses were published today as industry leaders gathered at an event at the Royal Mail Group Head Office in London to discuss skin cancer risks in industry.

Shaun Davis, Royal Mail Group Director of Safety, Health, Wellbeing and Sustainability, said: “On joining Royal Mail three years ago it quickly became apparent to me that there was an opportunity to strengthen our wellbeing and sustainability strategy in the area of outdoor worker protection.

“Due to the predominately outdoor nature of our work and the absolute requirement to keep our people safe and healthy, research in the area of sun safety was an obvious area for me to explore. Using my research I have been able to formulate and develop our sun safety strategy. Working with IOSH to promote it is a real privilege.”

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