

ADOLESCENT SUN EXPOSURE AND SUN PROTECTION BEHAVIOUR DURING SECONDARY SCHOOL ATHLETIC EVENTS

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Introduction

Excessive ultraviolet radiation (UVR) and sunburn in childhood and adolescence is an important risk factor for the development of skin cancer later in life. The majority of New Zealand (NZ) secondary schools hold an annual athletics sports day which is usually compulsory for students to attend. These events can result in students spending long periods of time outdoors and experiencing prolonged sun exposure and sunburn. Information about sun protection practices and the availability of shade at these events is lacking.

Aim

To observe the sun protection practices of students and staff and the physical environment at school athletics days held during peak UVR hours.

Methods

An observational study of Dunedin City secondary school students was conducted at schools' athletics days during February/March 2015, when the UVI level was above 7 and sun protective behaviours should always be practiced. An observational checklist was used to record the use of sun protective hats, clothing coverage, use and availability of shade and the availability of sunscreen. A total of 1225 adolescents and 215 adults were observed.

Outcomes

The sun protective behaviour of both secondary school students and adult supervisors was poor. For students, only 3.4% were wearing sun protective hats, 19.0% had clothing coverage below the elbow and 21.4% below the knee. For adult supervisors, 4.2% were wearing sun protective hats, 49.3% clothing below the elbow and 59.5% clothing coverage below the knee. Shade was not generally available for students' use while competing. Sunscreen was provided to students by approximately half of the schools.

Relevance

We recommend that portable shade (such as gazebos) be used at every individual athletic event so that students have access to shade while not competing. Students should also be encouraged to wear sun protective hats and clothing while not competing and the school should always provide SPF 30+ broad spectrum sunscreen during a school sports day. Ideally, all adult supervisors should role model the correct use of sun protective hats and clothing.