

## **Slip, slop, slapped**

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Date: 26/03/2004

Words: 982 Publication: Illawarra Mercury

Section: News

Page: 23

News this week that sunscreen may not offer the right skin cancer protection was a slap in the face to both manufacturers and those cancer-conscious souls who slather on the 30-plus while outdoors. Researchers have found the nation's most common cancer may be caused by UVA not UVB rays, which sunscreens primarily protect against. By KYLIE WALKER

WE'VE come a long way since pink zinc was the hottest accessory for summertime noses, and kids who grew up with Slip, Slop, Slap are now in their 20s.

It's increasingly common to see young beachgoers completely covered up and the latest sunscreens are designed to do more than just stop a burn.

But it appears sun protection measures now need another rethink, as the skin cancer rate continues to rise and our understanding of sunlight and its effect on skin continues to evolve.

About 380,000 Australians have a skin cancer removed every year, and more than 1000 die from the disease.

For a long time it's been thought that the nation's most common and costly cancer is primarily caused by the ultraviolet-B rays emitted by the sun.

This week it's emerged that the real baddie may in fact be ultraviolet-A radiation.

Dermatology Professor Gary Halliday said the finding by his team could lead to a complete overhaul of sunscreens, which protect more against UVB than UVA.

Sunscreen made its debut in Australia in the 1930s, after sunburn was linked with more rapidly-ageing skin.

In 1950 scientists started exploring the possibility that sunlight could lead to skin cancer.

"By the 1970s the weight of evidence linking sun exposure and skin cancer was such that we couldn't ignore it," said Dr Craig Sinclair, chairman of the Cancer Council of Australia's skin cancer committee.

"That was really what started, back in 1980, the first skin cancer prevention campaign in Australia, Slip Slop Slap."

About the same time, the first tanning salons appeared - touted as a safe alternative to sunbaking.

Although scientists had identified the cancer link by the 1970s, they still weren't sure what part of sunlight was causing the problem.

At the end of that decade several studies identified UVB as the culprit, and sunscreens were altered to block the UVB spectrum. Little protection was given against UVA.

This thinking persisted into the late 1980s, when specialists started to suspect the more abundant UVA might also have something to do with melanoma and other skin cancers.

“What we've known for a long time is that UVA is a key contributor to skin ageing, wrinkles, freckly skin,” Dr Sinclair said.

“What we haven't known is its contribution to skin cancer.”

Evidence over the past decade has increasingly pointed to the carcinogenic effect of the UVA light emitted by tanning lamps and sunbeds, leading scientists to question whether the same could be said of UVA from the sun.

Prof Halliday and his Sydney University colleagues studied the mutations found in non-melanoma skin cancers.

“We found there were a lot more UVA mutations in human skin cancers than UVB-induced mutations, and this has never been shown before,” he said.

“Plus, the cells at the base of a tumour, which are the cells which form the tumour, only had UVA mutations in them, no UVB mutations.”

Prof Halliday's finding is likely to mean sunscreens have to be revamped once more.

“Back in the '60s they were using chemicals that largely absorbed the ultraviolet radiation but the sunscreens today use minute metallic particles to reflect UV radiation from the skin,” Dr Sinclair said.

“The capability of the sunscreen to block ultraviolet-A has certainly improved over the last decade but there's still certainly room for improvement.”

“It reminds sunscreen manufacturers and those who are responsible for developing regulations around sunscreen that they need to ensure that sunscreens offer the best broad-spectrum protection, not just in the UVB range.”

Under the Australian standard - now being reviewed - all sunscreens rated 30-plus or higher provide broad spectrum protection, but Prof Halliday said even those products could be improved. The finding also has implications for solarium

operators.

Solariums emit levels of UV radiation up to five times the strength of the midday summer sun in Sydney and Melbourne, the Cancer Council says.

Australasian Solarium Association spokesman Patrick Holly denies that - he says the UVA and UVB radiation used in sun lamps is weaker than sunlight.

“Twenty years ago the mix of wavelength in lamps was quite different - UVB was much higher. But because of concerns of the medical profession, the lamp manufacturers in Europe reduced the UVB about 15 years ago,” Mr Holly said.

“At that time UVA was perceived as being non-intrusive towards skin cancer.

“We now have for the first time some sort of indication that UVA light over-exposure may be dangerous for you.”

Mr Holly has sent Prof Halliday's research to the European manufacturers of sun lamps.

“I hope they will look at the technical details about the wave length in the UV mix,” he said.

But solarium operators have no immediate plans to warn off customers, maintaining that baking in the sunshine is more dangerous than the average 10-minute tanning salon session.

“You see less sunburn in solaria than you do on the beach,” Mr Holly said.

Prof Halliday and Dr Sinclair say deliberate tanning is never healthy, whatever the method.

Slipping on a shirt and slapping on a hat remain the best skin cancer prevention methods, they say, besides - of course - simply staying out of the sun in the first place.