



Cancer Society of New Zealand  
National Office

Te Rōpū Mate  
Pukupuku o Aotearoa

Level 6  
Wakefield House  
90 The Terrace  
PO Box 10847  
Wellington

Telephone: 64 4 494-7270  
Facsimile: 64 4 494-7271

Websites: [www.cancernz.org.nz](http://www.cancernz.org.nz)  
[www.daffodilday.org.nz](http://www.daffodilday.org.nz)  
Email: [admin@cancer.org.nz](mailto:admin@cancer.org.nz)

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26 March 2007

## Vitamin D and Sun Exposure

The Cancer Society recognises both the very real benefits - and the risks - of sun exposure. Because of this, we are very specific about the hours we advise sun safety.

The Society says its sun protection messages are based on the findings of an experts' group it convened in 2005 which concluded that "a balance is required between avoiding an increased risk of skin cancer and maintaining adequate vitamin D levels."

Sunlight is the best source of Vitamin D, which we need for strong bones and general health, and which may protect against cancers and auto immune conditions such as multiple sclerosis.

But the question of how much sun is good for you is very complex and depends on many factors, such as a person's health, location, skin-type, ethnicity and diet etc.

Of very real concern is the fact that New Zealand has among the highest skin cancer rates in the world. Each year, there are over 300 deaths, the majority from melanoma. There are also between 45,000 and 70,000 new non-melanoma skin cancers and around 1,800 new melanoma cases each year.

Excess sun exposure accounts for 90% of all skin cancers in this country. Moreover, skin cancer, which often causes substantial disfigurement, pain and suffering, is also readily preventable.

For these reasons, the Society does urge sun protection during peak ultraviolet radiation (UVR) periods, when the Ultraviolet Index (UVI), which measures the intensity of the ultraviolet radiation (UVR) in the environment, is 3 or above. In most parts of New Zealand, peak UVR times are between October and March, particularly between 11 am and 4 pm. However, in some parts of New Zealand, such as Northland, the UVI is 3 or above for longer periods of the year.

Sensible sun protection in daylight saving months should not put people at risk of vitamin D deficiency. Most people get enough UVR exposure to achieve adequate vitamin D levels produced through incidental sun exposure outside peak UVR times. Someone who burns easily in the sun may only need 5 minutes of daily summer sun exposure, while someone who tans more easily or has darker skin will need more time e.g. up to 20 minutes.

The Society says while sun protection is not generally necessary in winter months, people should protect themselves if at high altitudes and in snow.

In recognition of the importance of the Vitamin D issue, the Society is reconvening an expert advisory group later this year to review new and emerging research in this area.

See the Cancer Society's Position Statement:

**[The Risks and Benefits of Sun Exposure in New Zealand](http://www.cancernz.org.nz/HealthPromotion/SkinCancerControl/PositionStatements/)**

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For more information, contact:

Dr. Judith Galtry  
Cancer Society of New Zealand  
Tel: (04) 494-7196  
Mobile: 0274 583 484  
Email: [judith.galtry@cancer.org.nz](mailto:judith.galtry@cancer.org.nz)