



**Cancer Society of New Zealand  
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## **May is the month to take sunhats off**

New Zealanders can shed their hats and sunscreen from today - for a short time - without worrying about the risks of skin cancer, according to the Cancer Society.

Skin Cancer Control Advisor, Dr Judith Galtry, says sunhats and other forms of sun protection like sunscreen are not generally necessary throughout most of New Zealand from May to the end of September.

"Sun protection is important when the Ultraviolet Index (UVI) reaches 3 or above, as that's the level that can cause skin damage in people with fair skin. From now until the end of September, in most of the country, peak UVI levels drop to less than 3, which is not high enough to cause skin damage."

"We're conscious that people shouldn't compromise their Vitamin D levels by being SunSmart when it's not necessary. Vitamin D is, largely, created in the body as a result of exposure of the skin to ultraviolet radiation, and is important for strong bones and general good health. It may also protect against some cancers."

According to Dr Galtry, "Schools and early childhood services do not need to implement their usual sun protection policies for the next four months. We suggest that children swap their sunhat for a warm hat from May until September."

Dr Galtry says people can help maintain their Vitamin D levels by getting approximately 2 - 3 hours of sunlight to their face, arms and hands each week during the months of May to September. People with darker skin need approximately 3 - 6 times that amount.

Dr Galtry says some people don't get enough sun, particularly in winter, and risk vitamin D deficiency.

Groups that are more likely to be at risk of vitamin D deficiency include:

- naturally dark skinned people – who need more UV exposure to produce adequate levels of vitamin D as the pigment in their skin reduces UV absorption.
- people who cover their skin for religious or cultural purposes
- the elderly and people who are housebound or in institutional care

“Anyone who thinks they may be vitamin D deficient should seek medical advice,” Dr Galtry says. “Vitamin D levels can be checked through a blood test, and inadequate levels can be treated with supplements.”

Dr Galtry warned that there are exceptions to SunSmart's 'hats off' advice.

“People who are spending time at high altitudes ski-ing, climbing or tramping, for example, or near highly reflective surfaces, such as snow and water, will still need to use their hats, sunglasses and SPF 30+ sunscreen, as skin and eye damage can occur in these situations.”

“And people in Auckland and Northland should start to protect themselves again from the end of August, as the UV Index tends to be higher the further north you go.”

#### **How to check UV Index levels:**

- You should protect yourself from the sun when the UV Index reaches 3 or above. Peak UVR periods are generally between 11am and 4pm between October and March inclusive and for longer periods in Auckland and the far north.

During the daylight saving months, you can find the UVI on the weather page of all New Zealand daily newspapers, or throughout the year on the SunSmart website [www.sunsmart.org.nz/uv-radiation--index](http://www.sunsmart.org.nz/uv-radiation--index) or on NIWA's website at <http://www.niwa.cri.nz/services/free/uvozone>

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#### **Related links & resources:**

<http://www.cancernz.org.nz/HealthPromotion/SkinCancerControl/VitaminD/>

<http://www.cancernz.org.nz/HealthPromotion/SkinCancerControl/UVI/>

## ***1 May – Hats Off Day***

### Key Facts - skin cancer, sun exposure and vitamin D

- Too many New Zealanders still get too much sun exposure in summer and put themselves at risk of skin cancer.
- New Zealand and Australia have the world's highest melanoma incidence rates.
- The most recent melanoma statistics from the New Zealand Health Information Service show that in 2004:
  - 1,896 people were diagnosed with melanoma (949 men and 947 women)
  - 249 people died of melanoma (152 males and 97 females)
  - among women, melanoma was the third most common cancer, whereas among men, melanoma was the fourth most common cancer.
- In 2004, there were 85 deaths (48 males, 37 females) from non melanoma skin cancer.
- A large three yearly survey of New Zealanders' sun protection awareness and behaviour commissioned by the Cancer Society found that in the 2005/06 summer:
  - 18% of people reported getting sunburned during the previous weekend compared to only 10% in 1994 when the survey was first carried out.
  - In 2005/06 summer, almost 40% reported having experienced severe sunburn at some stage in their lives.
- During the daylight saving months, New Zealand has 40% higher peak UVR levels than places at similar latitudes in the northern hemisphere.
- **Sun protection is needed when the UV Index (which measures the intensity of UVR in the environment) reaches 3 or above; so that means a hat, sunscreen; protective clothing, shade and sunglasses.**

### **Vitamin D**

- Vitamin D is largely created in the body as a result of exposure to ultraviolet radiation, and is important for strong bones and general good

health. It may also protect against some cancers and other conditions, such as multiple sclerosis or rheumatoid arthritis.

- While most vitamin D is produced in the skin by exposure to UVB from sunlight, low levels are also present in some foods, such as eggs, oily fish and some meats. Vitamin D is stored in fat and muscle and slowly released.
- In daylight saving months, most New Zealanders should be able to get enough vitamin D during their typical daily outdoor activities. Most people need a few minutes of sunlight on their face, arms and hands on either side of the peak UV period (i.e. between early October and late March between 11 am and 4 pm).
- Based on available research, it has been estimated that people with fair skin can achieve adequate vitamin D levels (>50 nmol/L) in summer by exposing the face, arms and hands or the equivalent surface area to sunlight for only a few minutes on either side of the peak UV periods on most days of the week.
- People with naturally dark skin require more ultraviolet radiation exposure to produce adequate levels of vitamin D as the pigment in their skin reduces ultraviolet radiation absorption. However, sun exposure should not be deliberately sought during the peak UVR period (i.e. between early October and late March between 11am and 4pm).
- There is evidence to suggest that prolonged sun exposure does not cause Vitamin D levels to continue to increase.
- Vitamin D production decreases during winter when the intensity of ultraviolet radiation is lower. The body can rely on tissue stores of vitamin D for between 30 and 60 days, assuming vitamin D levels are adequate prior to winter.
- In winter, most people do not need any sun protection, unless at high altitudes or near highly reflective surfaces, such as snow or water.
- To maintain vitamin D levels over the winter month's people need 2-3 hours per week of sunlight on their face, arms and hands.
- Some people don't get enough sun, particularly in winter, and risk vitamin D deficiency. Some sections of the community could be facing long-term health consequences due to vitamin D deficiency and will need vitamin D supplementation.

- Those at extra risk of vitamin D deficiency include people with very dark skin, people who are housebound or in institutionalized care, women who wear full body coverage clothing for cultural or religious purposes and breastfeeding babies of Vitamin D deficient women.
- Anyone who is concerned that they may be Vitamin D deficient should see their doctor. Vitamin D levels can be checked through a blood test, and inadequate levels can be treated with supplements.