

SKIN CANCER AND SUN SAFETY



HIGH PERFORMANCE
SPORT NEW ZEALAND

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION FOR SPORT



Why sun safety matters

New Zealand has the world's highest melanoma death rate, making sun safety education essential for athletes who often experience significant sun exposure during outdoor training and competition. Ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun causes 90% of all skin cancers, meaning many of these cancers are preventable. Implementing sun-safe practices into sporting environments is vital.

Athletes often train in peak UV hours and have uniforms that leave skin exposed. Outdoor sports such as rowing, canoe/kayaking, sailing, running, and skiing carry high risk due to time spent under direct sun or near reflective surfaces like water and snow. Protecting your skin is not only vital for your long-term health, it also supports your athletic performance by reducing the risk of sunburn and heat-related issues.

Understanding skin cancer

Skin cancer is the abnormal growth of skin cells, often triggered by excessive exposure to UV radiation from the sun. There are several types, including melanoma, basal cell carcinoma, and squamous cell carcinoma. Prevention and early detection are crucial.

NZ sunlight has very high UV radiation, particularly between 10 am and 4 pm from September to April. UV damage is irreversible and builds up over a lifetime, leading to skin cancer.

Key sun safe practices in sport

Follow the SunSmart guidelines (Slip, Slop, Slap, and Wrap):

Slip on sun-protective clothing

Wear clothes with a tight weave, collars, and long sleeves. Sport-specific long-sleeved items (e.g. rash vests) should be encouraged.

Slop on sunscreen

Use broad-spectrum, water-resistant sunscreen of at least **SPF 30+** (SPF 50 is recommended for water/snow sports).

- Apply 20 minutes before going outside.
- Reapply every two hours, or immediately after sweating or swimming.
- Use about 8 teaspoons for a full body application.
- Don't forget lip SPF protection as well.

Slap on a hat

Use wide-brimmed, bucket, or legionnaire hats. Caps do not provide enough protection to the ears and neck.

Wrap on sunglasses

Use close-fitting, wrap-around sunglasses that meet the AS/NZS 1067:2016 standard.

Seek shade

Take breaks in the shade of trees or temporary shelters.

Monitor skin changes

Check your skin regularly for new moles or changes in existing ones. If you notice anything unusual, consult a healthcare professional.



Common myths about sun safety



Myth

"You can't get sunburned on cloudy days."

Fact

UV rays can penetrate clouds, so protection is always necessary.

Myth

"Athletes with darker skin don't need sunscreen."

Fact

Skin cancer can affect all skin tones; sunscreen is important for everyone.

Myth

"A tan is a sign of health."

Fact

A tan is a sign of UV radiation skin damage.

Myth

"You don't need to wear sunscreen in winter."

Fact

Sunscreen is needed year-round to protect your skin in both Southern and Northern Hemispheres.

Regular skin checks

Regular skin checks with your GP or a skin specialist are recommended for all athletes. Some individuals with higher risk factors will require more frequent checks.

Stay sun safe

Sun safety is a vital part of your training routine. By adopting these simple practices, you can protect your skin, reduce your risk of skin cancer, and continue performing at your best.

Sunburn management

- Remove from sun exposure (cover up, move to shade or indoors)
- Cool the area with water (do not ice)
- Apply light moisturiser or aloe vera, do not cover with bandages
- If skin is broken or there is blistering seek medical review with a doctor
- Hydrate well for 24 – 48 hours
- Burns can continue to progress over a period of a few hours, so it is important to continue to stay out of the sun until the skin has healed completely.



Top Tip

To manage greasy palms after sunscreen application, try applying to back of hands and rubbing those together, careful washing of only palms after 20 minutes to allow for absorption and ensure that the back of the hands remain protected.

More information

1. [Cancer Society NZ — Skin cancer](#)
2. [SunSmart — Be safe - be SunSmart](#)
3. [UV Index Flyer](#)
4. [SunSmart UV radiation](#)