Sun Safety and Skin Cancer Prevention on Outdoor Worksites

Summer brings longer days and warmer temperatures, but it also increases the risk of harmful ultraviolet (UV) radiation exposure for outdoor workers. Across North America, millions of employees spend significant portions of their workday outdoors, making sun safety an important occupational health and safety concern. OHS directors and worksite managers play a critical role in protecting workers from excessive sun exposure and reducing the risk of skin cancer and other heat-related health effects.

Understanding the Risks of Prolonged Sun Exposure

Exposure to UV radiation from the sun is the primary cause of skin cancer, the most commonly diagnosed cancer in North America. UV radiation damages skin cells over time, and repeated exposure can lead to both non-melanoma skin cancers and melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer. Unlike many workplace hazards, the effects of UV exposure are cumulative, meaning damage builds over years of exposure.

In addition to increasing cancer risk, prolonged sun exposure can cause painful sunburns, premature skin aging, eye damage, immune system suppression, and heat-related illnesses. Workers

may not notice the immediate effects of UV exposure, particularly on cloudy days when up to 80% of UV rays can still penetrate cloud cover. Reflection from water, sand, concrete, and metal surfaces can further increase exposure levels.

Industries and Workers at Risk

Certain sectors face significantly higher risks due to the amount of time employees spend outdoors. Construction workers are among the most vulnerable because they often work during peak daylight hours with limited access to shade. Other high-risk industries include:

- Agriculture and farming
- Landscaping and grounds maintenance
- Road construction and transportation
- Utilities and telecommunications
- Oil and gas operations
- Forestry and logging
- Parks and recreation services
- Roofing and building maintenance
- Municipal public works

Workers with fair skin, light-colored eyes, or a history of frequent sunburns may be at greater risk of skin damage and skin cancer. However, UV radiation can affect people of all skin tones, making sun protection essential for every worker.

Practical Sun Safety Measures for Outdoor Worksites

Employers can significantly reduce UV exposure risks by implementing a comprehensive sun safety program. Effective prevention strategies include:

Schedule Work Strategically

Whenever possible, schedule physically demanding outdoor tasks during early morning or late afternoon hours when UV radiation levels are lower. Limit prolonged exposure during peak UV periods, typically between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.

Provide Shade and Rest Areas

Temporary shelters, canopies, tents, or shaded break areas can offer workers relief from direct sunlight. Encourage employees to take regular breaks in shaded locations throughout the day.

Promote Protective Clothing

Workers should wear lightweight, breathable clothing that covers as much skin as practical. Long-sleeved shirts, long pants, and clothing with built-in UV protection can help reduce exposure without significantly increasing heat stress.

Use Sun-Protective Accessories

Wide-brimmed hats provide better protection than baseball caps by shielding the face, ears, and neck. UV-blocking safety sunglasses help protect workers from eye damage while maintaining visibility and compliance with safety requirements.

Encourage Sunscreen Use

Broad-spectrum sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher should be readily available on worksites. Workers should apply sunscreen to exposed skin before starting work and reapply every two hours or more frequently if sweating heavily.

Educate Workers About UV Risks

Training programs should help workers understand UV hazards, recognize signs of skin damage, and adopt safe sun practices.

Supervisors can reinforce sun safety messages through toolbox talks and safety meetings, particularly during summer months.

Building a Culture of Sun Safety

Sun safety should be treated as seriously as any other workplace hazard. By incorporating UV protection into health and safety policies, conducting risk assessments, and providing appropriate protective measures, employers can reduce the long-term health impacts of sun exposure. A proactive approach not only helps prevent skin cancer but also demonstrates a commitment to worker well-being and occupational health excellence.

Below, download a helpful UV index chart to know how to keep yourself and your workers safe any time of day.