

ADDING SUN PROTECTION TO SPORT

Michelle Baker, CEO of the Melanoma Fund creates campaigns that raise awareness of sun protection to help avoid skin cancer in sport and outdoor recreation. Here she discusses how and why, despite the facts and alarming, ever escalating skin cancer rates in the UK, there is still such little regard for sun protection or the potential consequence of dismissing this crucial habit, that being skin cancer...

THE OUTDOOR KIDS SUN SAFETY CODE

SPARKING AN IDEA

"Dropping off my 9-year-old son at summer sport activities was always a bitter-sweet experience, with the guilt of a working mum, omnipresent. He was however always willing, active outdoors and I believed completely safe within the care of a trusted organisation, so happy days.

One day however, despite ensuring my son had sun protection on (and with him) he suffered a sunburn, which that evening blazed angrily across his neck and back of legs. Having just started working for the Melanoma Fund, I was aware of how potentially dangerous this was, and felt angered and frustrated that as a parent, I had done all I could to avoid it. However, had I?

The next day, after confronting the coaches, I was told that it was my responsibility to provide sun protection, and the responsibility of the child to use it. When I questioned their role, they advised me that it was not their issue, and to contact the LTA if I wanted to discuss this matter further.

This incident in 2014, led to the creation of the Outdoor Kids Sun Safety Code and a partnership with the Youth Sport Trust, the Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU), the Association for Physical Education (AfPE) and UK Coaching. We were supported by hundreds of National Governing Bodies of Sport, including the LTA, England Athletics, Sport England and the Welsh Sports Association, and overarching outdoor activity groups, with thousands of clubs signing up as Sun Protection Accredited.

This on-line resource is free and simple to implement, however, despite this, challenges surrounding sun protection implementation and promotion in sport remain very real.

Skin cancer represents the most diagnosed form of cancer in the UK, and around 90% of cases are caused by over-exposure to UV radiation meaning that the vast majority are entirely preventable – ***So why are we not doing more to prevent this epidemic?***

As we all know, healthy habits, created whilst young such as working smart, cleaning teeth, taking regular exercise, and eating well, can last a lifetime, enhancing health, wealth, and happiness, (as the saying goes) and are the responsibility of ALL parents and carers.

However, when it comes to sun protection, many of us tend to find this habit difficult to instil and easy to dodge, instead of ensuring it is discussed positively, and implemented effectively. Many parents and indeed those who work outdoors with children may in fact ensure that children are sun protected, but often then neglect to protect their own skin in favour of a tan, providing children with a powerful and negative subliminal message surrounding this matter.

ADDING SUN PROTECTION TO THE GAME!

To ensure that children therefore take responsibility themselves, the charity created Sun-Sorted! in 2021, a quiz to help children understand more about the sun, their skin and why sun protection is so important. To seed the idea home, the charity distributed 6,000 SPF30 SunSense sunscreen bottles to outdoor activity groups, encouraging coaches and leaders to distribute, using the quiz as a fun but educational resource.

This year, the charity is launching a new Sun-Sorted! video to provide more amazing facts regarding the sun and our skin, ideal for use as an educational resource for teachers, coaches and indeed all the family.

SUNGUARDING SPORT

Over 16,000 individuals are diagnosed with melanoma (the most deadly form of skin cancer) per year in the UK and incidence continues to rise rapidly, with annual rates expected to reach nearly 20,000 by 2025. Furthermore, over 200,000 cases of non-melanoma skin cancer are also diagnosed each year with rates predicted to double by 2025. With over 210,000 cases of skin cancer diagnosed annually in the UK, it makes sense to target those individuals at the highest risk i.e., those who spend prolonged periods outdoors and are therefore exposed to increased levels of UV radiation from the sun. Although health and safety, welfare and safeguarding resources feature on the websites of all sports organisations, the Melanoma Fund discovered that many failed to mention sun protection.

One factor could be to do with the barrier that the word 'skin cancer' creates. If an organisation promotes the importance of getting active outdoors, the idea of mentioning that you might be increasing your risk of 'cancer' in doing so, can be perceived as negative.

To avoid this, the Melanoma Fund this year created Sunguarding Sport, a new campaign providing a positive message around sun protection, which to date has generated the support of over 30 leading sports organisations.

Approved by Professor Brian Diffey, Emeritus Professor of Photobiology in Dermatological Sciences and Scientific Ambassador for Melanoma Fund and Dr Elizabeth Blakeway-Manning, a Consultant Dermatologist and Medical Ambassador for Melanoma Fund, the advice is accurate, concise, and relevant. As well as providing guidelines on sun protection, including clothing, sunscreen, application and shade, the resource advises on how to avoid or deal with heatstroke, sunburn, heat exhaustion and dehydration.

Guidelines will also include tips and advice on specific sports, created in partnership with each national governing body. Participating organisations simply need to add the campaign logo on their websites, with a link to the free resources, include a poster, leaflets and sports specific tips and advice, available on www.melanoma-fund.co.uk

To ensure visibility, all supporting organisations will be required to promote the campaign's key messages to their affiliated members from May onwards.

WHY SPORT?

Sun protection for those who play sport differ greatly from those who undertake general day to day activities, due to the following factors:

- Time spent active
- Lack of shade
- Sweating / rubbing off product
- Minimal and compromised clothing
- Focus on activity not protection
- Application barrier such as a greasy grip / feel
- Environmental factors such as snow, water, altitude, and sun reflective surfaces

SUNGUARD AMBASSADORS

To help promote the campaign, a team of Sunguards, representing a variety of activities, will be encouraged to sign up to become active within different areas of the sports community, to help promote awareness within the industry.

Professor Brian Diffey asks; "Why do we think that sun exposure in childhood, especially overexposure that results in sunburn, is an important factor in the risk of developing melanoma later in life?"

"Support for this belief comes largely from migration studies in that fair-skinned people who migrate from the U.K. to sunny countries like Australia have a much lower risk of developing melanoma than native-born Australians.

Other studies have indicated that British people born in sunny India and then returning later in life to the U.K. have a higher risk than those born in the U.K. What both these observations show is that sun exposure in childhood is critical in the risk of developing melanoma?

Further evidence for the importance of childhood sun exposure as a risk factor in melanoma can be found when we look at the age at migration. Migrants arriving from the U.K. to Australia at less than 10 years of age have lifetime risks of melanoma, like those of native-born Australian residents, whereas migrants arriving later in adolescence or adulthood had substantially lower risks.

In conclusion, we can say that in fair-skinned people the highest risks of melanoma are observed among those who are exposed to strong sunlight in early life, even if the period of exposure was relatively brief."

Dr Elizabeth Blakeway-Manning says; "I have long believed that more could and should be done to promote sun protection within the UK sporting arena. Being a sport enthusiast and dermatologist, I fully appreciate the UV related risks that come with regular outdoor activity.

Unfortunately, sunscreen is all too commonly considered a product for sunny holidays, instead of the everyday essential that it should be, to protect us from skin cancers and premature skin ageing. Many of the patients that I consult in skin cancer clinics list outdoor activities amongst their regular hobbies. A change of perspective is required, starting with the sports industry instilling this message from grassroots level. We have a long way to go in the UK as far as sun protection awareness is concerned; however we are now moving in the right direction with the critical influence of these spearheading campaigns."

