

Sun protection at the snow



Protecting yourself from the sun's ultraviolet (UV) radiation is important in alpine areas or near reflective surfaces such as snow.

Overexposure to UV radiation can cause skin damage and sunburn, which may increase your risk of skin cancer¹. The risk can be higher in alpine regions with significant snow cover even when conditions are cold or overcast.

Most skin cancer can be prevented. Cancer Council Victoria recommends protecting your skin and eyes at the snow:

1. Slip on some sun-protective clothing – that covers as much skin as possible. Wear tops with long sleeves and a high neck or collar.
2. Slap on SPF30+ sunscreen – make sure it is broad spectrum and water resistant. Put it on 20 minutes before you go outdoors and reapply every two hours.
3. Slap on a winter hat – that protects your face, head, neck and ears.
4. Seek shade.
5. Slide on a one-piece visor or wrap-around sunglasses – make sure they meet Australian Standards.

Why is UV radiation a risk at the snow?

UV radiation is more intense at high altitude than at sea level because the air is clearer and there is less atmosphere to absorb harmful UV rays.² UV radiation increases by 5 per cent with every 1000 metre increase in altitude. There is up to 10 per cent more UV radiation at Mt Buller, Falls Creek and Hotham than at sea level.

Snow is highly reflective. On a sunny day, clean fresh snow can reflect as much as 88 per cent of UV radiation.³ This means that UV radiation not only reaches you directly, it also reaches you indirectly when it is scattered and reflected by the snow.

How do I protect my skin?

Most ski attire is designed to cover your exposed skin to keep you warm but don't forget the areas that aren't covered.

Remember these tips:

- Cover your skin by wearing tops with long sleeves and high necks or collars and keep your head covered with a balaclava or a beanie with flaps to cover your ears.
- Apply a generous quantity of SPF30+, broad spectrum, water resistant sunscreen to all exposed areas of skin (face, throat, back of the neck, ears and backs of hands if not wearing gloves) 20 minutes before going outside. Remember that snow reflects UV radiation, so make sure you apply sunscreen under your chin, beneath the tip of your nose and behind your ears.
- Apply SPF30+, broad spectrum, water resistant lip balm or zinc cream to your lips. Carry small tubes of sunscreen and lip balm so you can reapply every two hours.
- UV radiation levels are usually at their peak in the middle of the day. Think about taking a break from the slopes and staying indoors or in the shade.
- If skiing in spring, conditions start to warm up, so you may have more skin exposed. Along with higher UV radiation levels, this may put you at a higher risk of skin damage and sunburn. Make sure you apply sunscreen liberally to all exposed areas, wear tops with long sleeves and a high neck or collar and hats that cover your head and ears.

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How do I protect my eyes?

Snow blindness (sunburn on the surface of the eye) is a real risk at the snow. The condition is usually temporary and may last only a few days but it can be very painful and contribute to long-term damage, such as cataracts.

To protect your eyes from glare and reflected UV radiation:

- Wear wrap-around sunglasses or snug-fitting one-piece visors. Check the tag to ensure they meet the Australian Sunglass Standard AS1067.
- If you wear prescription glasses, talk to your optometrist about getting prescription lenses fitted in your sunglasses.

Do I need to protect myself from UV radiation if I'm not at the snow?

If you're not in alpine areas or near reflective surfaces like water or snow then it is important to get some winter sun for vitamin D.

From May to August in most parts of Victoria UV radiation levels drop below 3;⁴ this is when UV levels are unlikely to cause skin damage or contribute to the risk of skin cancer. During these months you need more UV exposure to maintain vitamin D levels, which is important for general health.

So if you're not in alpine areas or near reflective surfaces during these months, remove your sun protection gear and aim to get two to three hours of UV exposure on your face, arms and hands spread over a week. People with naturally very dark skin may need three to six times these recommended levels of exposure.⁵

From September to April sun protection is required as the UV radiation level is 3 and above. During these months, most Victorians get enough UV exposure to enable adequate vitamin D production simply by going about their day-to-day activities. Only a few minutes of sun exposure is required per day outside of peak UV radiation times (10am – 3pm) on your face, arms and hands.⁶ People with naturally very dark skin may need three to six times these recommended levels of exposure.⁵

To find out the UV radiation level for your local area at any time of the year check the SunSmart UV Alert at www.sunsmart.com.au or in the weather section of daily newspapers.

Further information and resources

Being SunSmart in Australia information sheet.

How Much Sun Is Enough? Getting the balance right: vitamin D and sun protection brochure.

Visit www.sunsmart.com.au or contact the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20.

UV-protective clothing and accessories can be purchased at the Cancer Council Victoria's Carlton shop or online at www.cancervic.org.au.

This information sheet can be photocopied for distribution.

References

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