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Not sinking in: Australians are forgetting the sun safe message

The 2017 SHARC (Skin Health Australia Report Card) has found that the number of Australians getting sunburnt has increased over the past four years.

68% of adults (equivalent to 13.6 million Australians) reported an unexpected sunburn in the last two years, a figure that has increased from 65% in 2014. This upward trend suggests Australians are not getting the message and becoming increasingly complacent about the risks of skin cancer and melanoma.

The 2017 SHARC Report is based on a national population survey of skin health commissioned by the Skin & Cancer Foundation Inc in Melbourne.

Of concern was that 25-34 year olds were the most represented, with 82% reporting sunburn in the last two years. The results for 35-44 year olds was also very high at 76%.

“It seems that the younger generations are forgetting some of the sun safety messages they were exposed to as children. This can have profound consequences in Australia. The risk of melanoma, the cancer that kills more young people than any other cancer, doubles if one has had five or more sunburns at any age,” said Associate Professor Chris Baker, a consultant dermatologist at the Skin and Cancer Foundation Inc, and Immediate Past President of the Australasian College of Dermatologists.

Couples with dependents seemed to pay little regard for their own skin health with 81% getting burned unexpectedly. Comparatively, 63% of couples without dependents reported being burnt, and even less for people living alone - 58%. The finding indicates that while mums and dads are busy making sure their children are protected while in the sun, they’re forgetting that they themselves need to be sun safe as well.

“We are still very much a sunburnt nation. Children learn about sun safety at school and importantly the messages are reinforced at those key family moments; at the beach, in the park, at the barbeques. So parents need to model good behaviour that children emulate in the moment, and carry later on in life,” said Associate Professor Baker.

Of those who reported being sunburnt, 30% said it happened during a walk, 29% while gardening, 26% at the beach, 19% watching an outdoor event and 18% while driving.

“People need to remember that sunburn can happen in any weather condition - even if you are outside on a cloudy day. It is imperative that you check the UV index before heading out for any activity so that you know the risk and can plan the sun protection you need,” said Associate Professor Baker.

The Skin & Cancer Foundation Inc notes these concerning results. Messages about sun safety and prevention of melanoma and skin cancer still have not sunk deep enough into the minds of Australians.

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Copies of the 2017 SHARC Report can be downloaded from the Skin & Cancer Foundation Inc's website at www.skincancer.asn.au

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