

Introduction

Skin cancer is the most common form of cancer in Ireland. Children who get sunburnt or who have too much exposure to the sun are at higher risk of developing skin cancer as adults.

This summary presents the key points of a report that looked at risk factors for children aged 10 to 17 in Ireland for the first time. The report was developed by the Institute of Public Health, with the National University of Ireland Galway, for the National Cancer Control Programme. The findings support the Government's work under the National Skin Cancer Prevention Plan 2019-2022.

How do children protect themselves from the sun?

Health authorities recommend that children's skin is protected by following the **SunSmart Code**.

The most common ways that children protected themselves were by using sunscreen and wearing sunglasses.

- 83% always or sometimes used sunscreen
- 72% wore sunglasses
- 50% wore clothes that covered their arms and legs
- 32% avoided the hottest time of the day (between 12noon and 3pm).

In general, girls were more likely than boys to protect themselves from the sun. The exception was that 50% of boys wore hats, compared to 44% of girls.

What do children think about their skin type and tanning?

- Young people aged 17-18 were asked to identify how their skin reacts to the sun, using the Fitzpatrick skin type scale. In this scale, type 1 means your skin always burns, never tans and may freckle (13.5%). Type 2 means your skin usually burns and will tan a little (33.6%). Type 3 means your skin burns sometimes and usually tans (38%). Type 4 means it burns a little and tans well (13%). Type 5 means it rarely burns and tans well (1.5%). Type 6 means it never burns (under 1%).
- Almost 50% of those aged 17-18 identified their skin as type 1 or type 2 on the Fitzpatrick scale. Children with pale or freckled skin and red or fair hair are in this group. They need extra protection from skin damage caused by the sun as they are at a higher risk of developing skin cancer in later life.
- There was no information in Ireland on children's attitudes to tanning. In Northern Ireland, over 66% of girls and 50% of boys agreed that 'they look better with a tan'. 69% of children reported they 'did not know' or 'disagreed' that tanning causes damage to the skin.

Skin cancer in Ireland

- Around 11,000 skin cancers are diagnosed each year in Ireland. Most of these are non-melanoma type cancers but around 1 in 10 are melanoma type cancers. Melanoma cancers can cause serious illness or death.
- The number of skin cancers, including melanomas, is expected to double between 2015 and 2045. Skin cancers are expected to increase more than any other type of cancer.

Children's exposure to sun and their risk of skin cancer

- Sunburn is defined as having red, hot and sore skin caused by too much sun. Skin damage can occur even when there is no sunburn, but sunburn means there is additional risk.
- If children get sunburn, have too much exposure to the sun, or use sunbeds, their risk of developing skin cancer as an adult is increased.
- The risk of developing melanoma as an adult could be 2 to 4 times higher when a child has experienced severe sunburn 3 times or more during childhood. Severe sunburn is when skin stays red for several days after exposure, or when it is sore, peels or blisters. Children's skin is more vulnerable to damage from the sun and sunbeds. This damage cannot be repaired, so sun protection is the only way to protect against the risk of skin damage.

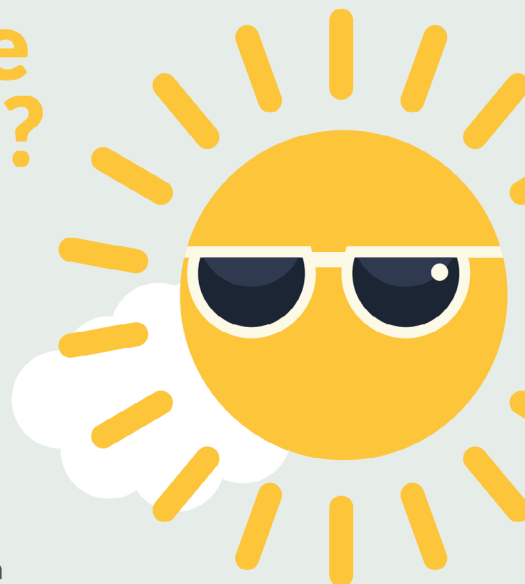
How often do children get sunburn?

- 88% of children reported they have had sunburn in their lifetime – 74% of these children had sunburn in the past year.
- Children from better-off families were more likely to say they had been sunburnt than children from poorer backgrounds.
- In Ireland, there were no reliable estimates of how severely children's skin was sunburnt or the number of children who went to a GP because of sunburn.

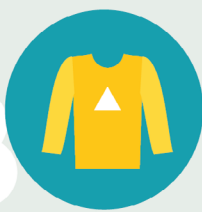


How SunSmart are children in Ireland?

Overview of sun protection behaviours, sunburn and sunbed use among 10-17 year old schoolchildren in Ireland (HBSC 2018)



1 in 2 children wear a hat on a sunny day, always or sometimes



1 in 2 children wear clothing to cover arms and legs when in the sun, always or sometimes



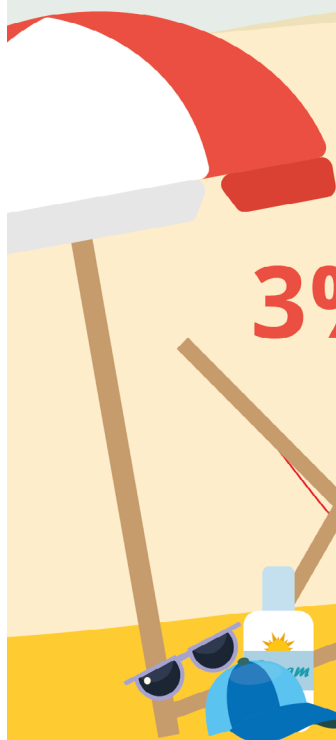
1 in 3 children avoid the sun during peak hours, always or sometimes



3 in 4 children wear sunglasses on a sunny day, always or sometimes



4 in 5 children use sunscreen on a sunny day, always or sometimes



3% of children reported using a sunbed in their lifetime



3 in 4 children reported having been sunburnt at least once during the summer (2018)

9 in 10 children reported that they had ever been sunburnt in their lifetime

Using sunbeds

- 3% of children used a sunbed (more girls than boys). Older teens used them a little more often than the 11-14 age group. By law, commercial sunbed services must not be offered to anyone under 18.

Information sources

The information in the report comes from many sources, including: Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Study 2018, National Cancer Registry of Ireland, Growing Up in Ireland National Longitudinal Survey of Children – Cohort 1998, Hospital In-Patient Enquiry (HIPE), Young Persons Behaviour and Attitudes Survey 2016 (Northern Ireland), the 2019 Healthy Ireland Survey, and meteorological data.

Gaps in the evidence

Our findings can help to keep children safe from skin damage that can increase the risk of skin cancers later in their lives. However, more research is needed on:

- Whether younger children (aged under 10) are at risk from sunburn, limited sun protection and using sunbeds
- Whether the sunburn that children experience is mild, moderate or severe
- Whether children use sun protection appropriately (for example, do they use sunscreen with a high-enough factor and wear hats that cover their ears and necks?)
- How children's sun safety behaviour is influenced by their family, friends and school and by their experiences online
- How tanning and sunbeds are marketed and promoted to children.



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