

Sunlight exposure: risks and benefits overview

NICE Pathways bring together all NICE guidance, quality standards and other NICE information on a specific topic.

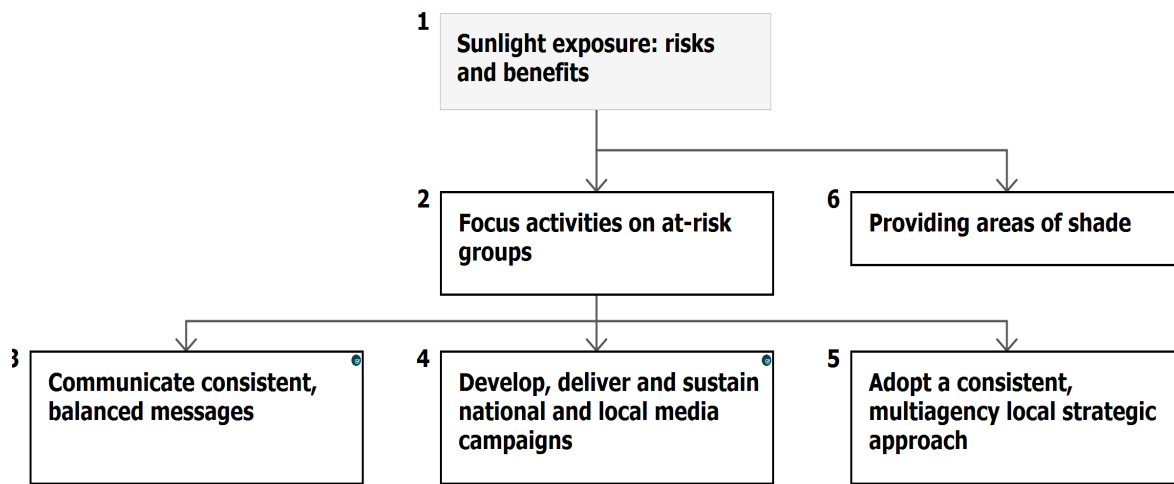
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<http://pathways.nice.org.uk/pathways/sunlight-exposure-risks-and-benefits>

Pathway last updated: June 2017

This document contains a single pathway diagram and uses numbering to link the boxes to the associated recommendations.

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1 Sunlight exposure: risks and benefits

No additional information

2 Focus activities on at-risk groups

All public health activities related to over- or underexposure to sunlight should focus on:

- Groups of people who should take extra care to avoid skin damage and skin cancer, including:
 - children (particularly babies) and young people
 - people who tend to burn rather than tan
 - people with lighter skin, fair or red hair, blue or green eyes, or who have lots of freckles
 - people with many moles
 - people who are immunosuppressed (that is, they have less resistance to skin problems as a result of a disease or use of particular drugs)
 - people with a personal or family history of skin cancer (even if their natural skin colour is darker than that of the family member who had cancer).
- Groups who spend a lot of time in the sun and so are at increased risk of skin cancer, such as:
 - outdoor workers (see what NICE says on [workplace health: policy and management practices](#))
 - those with outdoor hobbies, for example sailing or golf.
- Groups with high, but intermittent, exposure to strong sunlight and who are therefore at increased risk of skin cancer. This includes people who sunbathe or take holidays in sunny countries.
- Groups who have little or no exposure to the sun for cultural reasons or because they are housebound or otherwise confined indoors for long periods. For example, people who are frail or in institutions, or people who work indoors all day. These people are at increased risk of low vitamin D status (for more information see what NICE says on [vitamin D: increasing supplement use among at-risk groups](#)).

NICE has produced recommendations on [skin cancer](#).

3 Communicate consistent, balanced messages

The following recommendations are for health and social care practitioners.

Whenever the opportunity arises make people aware that, although sunlight exposure is a normal part of everyday life and some sunlight is good for health, there are risks from excessive exposure.

Communicate consistent, balanced messages about the risks and benefits of sunlight exposure and the groups at risk (see [focus activities on at-risk groups](#) [See page 3]). Include:

- environmental, biological and behavioural factors
- how to minimise the risks and maximise the benefits of sunlight exposure
- the strength of sunlight at different times of the day
- advice for children and young people
- advice according to people's skin type
- approaches to protecting skin (clothing, shade and sunscreen)
- checking for possible signs of skin cancer (see [skin cancer](#) in the NICE recommendations on suspected cancer recognition and referral)
- clarifying common misconceptions about sunlight exposure.

For more information see [supporting information for practitioners](#) in the NICE guideline on sunlight exposure: risks and benefits.

Follow the principles of behaviour change when conveying sunlight exposure messages (see what NICE says on [behaviour change](#)). This includes ensuring that messages:

- specify the recommended actions
- explain the benefits of changing behaviour
- try to enhance people's belief in their ability to adopt the recommended actions.

Use existing community health promotion programmes or services to raise awareness of the risks and benefits of sunlight exposure.

Offer one-to-one or group-based advice, as appropriate, tailored to the type of risks the person or group faces.

Encourage and support people at increased risk of low vitamin D status or skin cancer to contribute to awareness-raising activities.

Quality standards

The following quality statement is relevant to this part of the interactive flowchart.

1. Local health promotion activities

4 Develop, deliver and sustain national and local media campaigns

The following recommendations are for commissioners of public health campaigns.

Develop, deliver and sustain national and local media campaigns to raise awareness of the risks and benefits of sunlight exposure.

Campaign messages should:

- Aim to make people aware of the need to think about their daily exposure to sunlight.
- Target at-risk groups (see [focus activities on at-risk groups \[See page 3\]](#)) and be consistent (see [supporting information for practitioners](#) in the NICE guideline on sunlight exposure: risks and benefits).
- Address common misconceptions about keeping safe in the sun and the risks and benefits of sunlight exposure.
- Present a balanced picture of the risks and benefits, explaining how to enjoy the sun safely.
- Emphasise how the risks and benefits will vary depending on the individual.
- Relate to leisure activities and holidays as well as daily life.

Campaigns should:

- Use different channels to communicate simple and more complex messages. For example, population-wide messages may focus on sun protection and enjoying the sun safely. More nuanced messages, such as the risk of over- or underexposure for subgroups and individuals, could be included in supporting resources such as leaflets, press statements and websites.
- Be delivered in a way that meets the target audience's preferences. For example, via radio, social media, texts, posters or leaflets.
- Be displayed at prominent locations. For example, airports, schools, pharmacies, travel vaccination clinics, leisure and sporting events, and on travel websites and in magazines.
- Be repeated over time and regularly altered to keep the audience's attention.
- Be timed for maximum effect. For example, so they take place during spring and summer when the risk of sunburn is highest in the UK, or when people are more likely to travel abroad.

Ensure that the format and content of national campaigns are developed and piloted with the target audience. If feasible, do the same for local activities and supporting resources.

Ensure that campaigns tackle health inequalities by taking into account cultural, religious and social norms about sunlight exposure. Outline what different groups should do to minimise their risks and maximise their benefits and how this may vary on an individual basis. Messages should also be conveyed in languages spoken locally.

Integrate and coordinate campaign messages with existing national and local health promotion programmes or services to keep costs as low as possible. (Examples of initiatives they could be integrated with include [Sure Start](#), [Change4Life](#) and [community pharmacy public health services](#).)

Quality standards

The following quality statement is relevant to this part of the interactive flowchart.

1. Local health promotion activities

5 Adopt a consistent, multiagency local strategic approach

The following recommendations are for commissioners and senior managers in local authorities.

Adopt a consistent, multiagency approach. Focus on making at-risk groups aware of the risks and benefits of sunlight exposure (see [focus activities on at-risk groups](#) [See page 3]).

Work with the NHS, council leaders, elected members, public health teams, local businesses and voluntary and community organisations to:

- address local needs, as identified by the joint strategic needs assessment and other local, regional or national data
- identify local opportunities to increase public awareness about the risks and benefits of sunlight exposure
- ensure the content of all messages is consistent (see [supporting information for practitioners](#) in the NICE guideline on sunlight exposure: risks and benefits)
- target health, social care and other practitioners in contact with at-risk groups
- carry out culturally appropriate activities (for example, to develop messages that local at-risk groups can relate to)
- ensure that messages related to skin type are relevant for the target audience.

Work with local and national media to present a balanced view of the health risks and benefits of sunlight exposure.

Establish clear, measurable objectives for prevention and awareness-raising activities.

Work with practitioners in specific settings such as residential care, schools and workplaces to implement prevention and awareness-raising activities (see [implementation](#) in the NICE guideline on sunlight exposure: risks and benefits).

6 Providing areas of shade

When designing and constructing new buildings, consider providing areas of shade created either artificially or naturally (for example, by trees).

When developing or redeveloping communal outdoor areas, check whether it is feasible to provide areas of shade. Shade could be created by constructing a specific structure or by planting trees.

For all new developments, ensure there is adequate access to areas of shade for people with a disability.

Glossary

Low vitamin D status

low vitamin D status (sometimes called vitamin D deficiency) is defined by the Department of Health as a plasma concentration of 25 hydroxyvitamin D (the main circulating form of the vitamin) of below 25 nmol/litre (equal to 10 ng/ml)

Sources

[Sunlight exposure: risks and benefits](#) (2016) NICE guideline NG34

[Skin cancer prevention](#) (2011 updated 2016) NICE guideline PH32

Your responsibility

The guidance in this pathway represents the view of NICE, which was arrived at after careful consideration of the evidence available. Those working in the NHS, local authorities, the wider public, voluntary and community sectors and the private sector should take it into account when carrying out their professional, managerial or voluntary duties. Implementation of this guidance is the responsibility of local commissioners and/or providers. Commissioners and providers are reminded that it is their responsibility to implement the guidance, in their local context, in light of their duties to avoid unlawful discrimination and to have regard to promoting equality of opportunity. Nothing in this guidance should be interpreted in a way which would be inconsistent with compliance with those duties.

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