

Sun protection statement from the Albinism Fellowship of Australia



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In Australia, overexposure to the sun is a cause for concern for everyone, especially young children, as research has shown that overexposure to UV during childhood and adolescence is a major factor in determining future skin cancer risk.

Most education systems, schools and businesses have a sun protection policy to protect children and staff, reducing the risk of developing skin cancers. For those with albinism the risk of developing skin cancer is even higher and greater protection is required as they have little or no melanin, which is responsible for producing pigment to protect the skin from sun damage.

Why those with albinism require greater sun protection

Those who have no melanin (OCA1), have very white hair and skin and are at extreme risk of sun damage to the skin and developing skin cancers, including melanoma. Others who produce small amounts of melanin may have blonde or reddish hair, but they also need greater sun protection than others without albinism and they have a high skin cancer risk.

The eyes of those without albinism only allows light to penetrate through the pupil (which closes down in bright light), but for those with albinism the iris lacks melanin and consequently light floods through the iris as well, not only causing temporary blindness and sometimes severe pain, but this over exposure to light can lead to eye damage. Sunglasses and tinted contact lenses can provide some protection, but on days of severe UV and glare people with albinism need to access deep shade.

What is suitable protection for those with albinism?

While a UV level of three is seen as a trigger for most people to seek sun protection, those with albinism can burn at much lower UV levels; even on a cloudy day and people with albinism sustain burns from rays reflected from sand, buildings, water and snow. Most people with albinism wear protective clothing, hats, sunglasses and sunscreen for some protection, but if they are to be outside for extended periods, more than a few minutes, they also need to access deep shade.

Adequate provision of shade outside is particularly important in schools, where most breaks are in the period of highest UV readings, between 10am and 2pm (or 11 and 3 DST). Deep shade provided in areas like canteens or where students are required to gather for longer periods or lessons, allows for inclusion of students with albinism. The provision of deep shade adjacent to PE and Sport areas allows students with albinism to participate, seeking shade in breaks from play, or to dip in and out of games with peers during play times. If a student's only option is to go indoors, they miss out on physical activity and are also isolated from peers, which is inequitable and can contribute to social isolation and reduced access to physical activity.

During non-school days planning outdoor activities during the low UV times of the day is the single most important measure for people with albinism to avoid sun damage.