

Sun and glare protection statement from the Albinism Fellowship of Australia



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.

Why those with albinism require greater sun protection than normal

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.

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. 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.

The eyes of those without albinism only allow 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 (indoor or outdoor) can lead to eye damage.

What is suitable protection for those with albinism?

Sunscreen: A broad-spectrum sunscreen (with some water proofing for children) that protects against UVA and UVB rays, is essential to wear most of the year, even if only going outside for short periods – they can burn in less than 5 minutes. This needs to be reapplied at regular intervals during the day. Their sunscreen use is far greater than the average person.

Protective clothing: Most people wear SPF rated clothing for outdoor or water sports during summer, but those with albinism need these for everyday wear outside for much of the year (especially in northern Australia). Hats (large brim or legionaire), long sleeves and pants in close weave material (you cannot see through it) are always worn when outside and high quality SPF specialist clothes are required for outdoor sports. “Sleeves” can be worn over short sleeves when outside so that they are easily removed when they return indoors.

Sunglasses or tinted contact lenses: provide protection from the sun and glare and improve functional vision markedly all year round, even on cloudy winter days. Very dark tinted swim goggles are worn for both indoor and outdoor pools, some requiring prescription lenses, to protect from glare.

Access to deep shade: is necessary if they are to be outside for extended periods. Shade sails can be used where heavy tree cover or verandahs are not present in private yards, especially where children are present.

Tinted windows or blinds (car and home): It is important to have the darkest legal tint to all car windows as protection from glare all year round (preventing eye pain or damage and improving ability to see). Living areas at home may need window tinting or blinds to reduce glare, without making the room dark.

It is essential that those with albinism have the right protection from sun and glare so that they can participate in outdoor activities with peers and not become socially isolated, due to inadequate access to protective measures.