

Helping Nevada School Children Become Sun Smart

[Announcer] This program is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[Latoya Simmons] Welcome to this edition of *PCD* Sound Bites. I'm your host, Latoya Simmons. The sun's ultraviolet rays, also known as UV rays, can damage the skin in as little as 15 minutes, putting you at risk for skin cancer. The risk grows with increased time in the sun. UV exposure, especially during childhood and adolescence, can produce harmful, long-term effects in adulthood. There are a number of ways to help protect your skin, one of which is starting a sun safety routine *early* in life. Today, I'm speaking by phone with Christine Thompson, Community Programs Manager at the Nevada Cancer Coalition, and author of a recent study detailing a school-based program to help Nevada school children establish healthy sun safety habits and decrease UV exposure. We'll discuss the results of her study, what impact the program had on children's skin health, and how it tried to change opinions of tanning practices. Thank you for joining me, Christine.

[Christine Thompson] You're most welcome. It's a pleasure to be here.

[Latoya Simmons] Christine, let's start with an overview of your study. What did you hope to achieve?

[Christine Thompson] Our ultimate goal is to reduce incidence of all skin cancer in Nevada, and particularly to reduce melanoma incidence, which of course is the deadliest kind of skin cancer. We know that sunburns early in life and tanning bed use before age 30 dramatically increase melanoma risk, so we decided to work at a grass roots level in our schools so that sun safety practices to protect against skin cancer become as common as handwashing has to protect against the spread of germs. Sun Smart Schools started with a seven school pilot program in the 2015-2016 school year. We conducted pre- and post-program surveys of students in grades 4 through 10 in both urban and rural Nevada schools. We wanted to find out what students and parents in participating schools already knew about sun safety, and what kind of sun safe behaviors they routinely practiced, if any. And then, at the end of the school year after the intervention, we wanted to see if and how the student's and parent's knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors about sun safety had changed.

[Latoya Simmons] How was the Sun Smart School curriculum tailored to meet the needs of children and teens?

[Christine Thompson] We looked for education- and standards-based curriculum that was readily accessible, was free, and was easy for teachers to implement. For the preschoolers, we chose Ray and the Sunbeatables™ - A Sun Safety Curriculum for Preschoolers that is developed by the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center and disseminated by the CATCH Global Foundation. For students in grades K through 8, we chose the EPA's SunWise: A Program that Radiates Good Ideas, and for high school students we chose the Skin Cancer Foundation's Sun Smart U, which features true stories of young skin cancer survivors, medically reviewed prevention guidelines, handouts, and activities, and this is something that can be taught in just one or two class periods.

[Latoya Simmons] What did you find after implementing the program?

[Christine Thompson] Among elementary and middle school students, we found that the Sun Smart Schools program was effective in increasing a broad range of knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors about protection from UV radiation.

Elementary aged students showed increased use of “Always” or “Sometimes” putting on sunscreen when going outside for a long time, and more elementary students reported wearing sunglasses after the intervention. Interestingly, middle school students showed an overall decrease in attitude toward the importance of sun safety practices from pre- to post-intervention, but they showed a significant increase of those who reported wearing a hat and an increase in students who reported wearing a long-sleeve shirt when outside in the middle of the day. And there was a significant decrease in the number of middle school students reporting they felt they and their friends looked better with a suntan. High school students showed an overall increase in practicing sun safe behaviors, including increased sunscreen use and wearing hats, but, despite these behavior changes, high school students’ attitudes about protecting themselves from too much sun did not change much, and the high school students also maintained a positive attitude toward the appearance of tanned skin.

[Latoya Simmons] Why do you think there were such differences in perception among children and teens?

[Christine Thompson] Our small study, as well as those of previous studies, show that education about the dangers of UV exposure is most effective in younger age groups, that is the kindergarten through middle school aged students. But as students grow older and enter their high school years, they appear to be more susceptible to competing influences. While older students may know and understand the risks associated with excessive UV exposure, they may still have the desire to adhere to the social norm that having tanned skin makes one look better.

[Latoya Simmons] Why is this type of research and education so important?

[Christine Thompson] The statistics about skin cancer incidence tell a big part of the story. One in every five Americans will develop some form of skin cancer during their lifetime. For young people, this is particularly concerning because the incidence of people under age 30 developing melanoma is increasing faster than among any other demographic group. But the thing to know about skin cancer is that most forms of skin cancer are easily prevented by reducing exposure to UV radiation from the sun, by avoiding tanning bed use, and by protecting against sunburn, especially blistering sunburns.

[Latoya Simmons] What advice would you give to other health professionals and researchers interested in implementing and reviewing a similar program in their community?

[Christine Thompson] I’d recommend looking at other successful programs. We think Nevada’s Sun Smart Schools certainly is one of those programs now, and we’re glad to share what we’ve learned and how we’ve structured our program. I’d also emphasize that annual review and

adjustments to the program will be important. And last, finding local champions also is a big help.

[Latoya Simmons] Thank you, Christine. You can read her study online at [cdc.gov/pcd](https://www.cdc.gov/pcd).

The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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