

## Recommendation for inclusion of a wide-brimmed hat in primary school uniform guidance

The HSE's National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP), in collaboration with Healthy Ireland and aligned to the implementation of the Skin Cancer Prevention Plan 2023-2026, is seeking the Department of Education's support for the inclusion of wide-brimmed hats in school uniform guidance.

### Importance of skin protection for children

Skin cancer is the most common cancer in Ireland with almost 13,000<sup>1</sup> new cases diagnosed annually. UV exposure during the first 10–15 years of life makes a disproportionately large contribution to lifetime risk of skin cancer<sup>2</sup>. Playing and spending time outdoors is good for children. However, it is important to protect children's skin when out in the sun. Too much exposure to the sun's ultraviolet (UV) radiation can lead to sun damage, sunburn and skin cancer. Children and young people are particularly vulnerable to the damaging effects of UV radiation from the sun.

Severe sunburn during childhood (3 or more instances before the age of 20) is associated with a 2-4 times higher risk of developing melanoma skin cancer in later life<sup>3</sup>. Research has shown levels of self-reported childhood sunburn in Ireland are high with nearly 90% of 10-to 17-year-olds said they have experienced sunburn in their lifetime<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> National Cancer Registry of Ireland. (2022). Cancer in Ireland 1994-2020: Annual statistical report 2022. [www.ncri.ie](http://www.ncri.ie)

<sup>2</sup> Cancer Institute New South Wales. (2012). NSW Skin Cancer Prevention Strategy 2012-15. <https://www.cancer.nsw.gov.au/getattachment/bd23da9f-1219-4e96-9da2-437a08217194/nsw-skin-cancer-prevention-strategy-2012-15.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Markovic, S. N., Erickson, L. A., Rao, R. D., Weenig, R. H., et. al. (2007). Malignant melanoma in the 21st century, part 1: epidemiology, risk factors, screening, prevention, and diagnosis. Mayo Clinic proceedings, 82(3), 364–380. <https://doi.org/10.4065/82.3.364>

<sup>4</sup> McAvoy, H., Rodriguez, L., Koltó, A and NicGabhairinn, S. (2020). Children's exposures to ultraviolet radiation - a risk profile for future skin cancers in Ireland. Institute of Public Health in Ireland. <https://publichealth.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/20200616-Childrensexposure-to-UV-report-final.pdf>

## Sun protective behaviour in children in Ireland

*Children's exposure to ultraviolet radiation – a risk profile for future skin cancers in Ireland* (2020)<sup>4</sup> found overall that sunscreen use among children in Ireland was reasonably high. However children, with or without input from their parents, do not appear to be taking precautions in a way that recognises sunscreen as the last line of defence after clothing, shade, hat and sunglasses. Half of children do not wear a hat or long-sleeved clothing in the sun and three quarters reported experiencing sunburn during the previous summer.

### Why wide-brimmed hats?

Wide-brimmed hats, including bucket and legionnaire style hats, protect the face, head, back of neck and ears. Baseball or peaked caps and sun visors are not recommended, as these styles do not protect the ears, cheeks or neck<sup>5 6</sup>. Common sites of skin damage and skin cancer are the neck, ears, lips, face and nose. These areas are constantly exposed to the elements and therefore, generally receive more UV radiation than other parts of the body. Wide-brimmed hats should always be used in combination with other forms of sun protection such as clothing, shade and sunscreen (see Addendum for the 5 S's of skin protection).

<sup>5</sup> Standards Australia. (2020). Australian Standard AS 4399:2020 Sun protective clothing -Evaluation and classification.

<sup>6</sup> Schalka, S., Steiner, D., Ravelli, F. N., Steiner, T., Terena, A. C., Marçon, C. R., Ayres, E. L., Addor, F. A., Miot, H. A., Ponzio, H., Duarte, I., Neffá, J., Cunha, J. A., Boza, J. C., Samorano, L.deP., Corrêa, M.deP., Maia, M., Nasser, N., Leite, O. M., Lopes, O. S., ... Brazilian Society of Dermatology (2014). Brazilian consensus on photoprotection. Anais brasileiros de dermatologia, 89(6 Suppl 1), 1–74. <https://doi.org/10.1590/abd1806-4841.20143971>

## Rationale for inclusion in school uniform guidance

In Ireland, the UV index (a measure of the strength of UV radiation) is usually 3 or above from April to September, even when it is cloudy, meaning it is particularly important to take precautions to protect skin at that time of year. Children spend half their childhood at school and about eight hours per week while travelling to and from school, on lunch breaks, and participating in outdoor school based activities. Much of this time falls between the hours of 11 and 3, when the sun is at its highest and UV rays strongest, increasing the risk of skin damage.

Wide-brimmed hats, as part of a school uniform policy, would promote the health and wellbeing of students, reduce their exposure to UV radiation and reinforce the importance of sun protection from a young age.

## Addendum

The easiest way to protect children's skin from UV is to follow the SunSmart 5 S's especially from April to September:

- **Slip on clothing:** We need to cover our skin as much as we can, using tops that have long sleeves to cover your arms and collars to cover your neck.
- **Slop on sunscreen:** Children need a stronger sunscreen than adults, with a Sun Protection Factor (SPF) of at least 50, while adults should wear a sunscreen with a SPF of at least 30. The sunscreen you use should be water resistant with high UVA protection and be reapplied every couple of hours. No sunscreen can provide 100% protection; it should be used with other measures such as clothing and shade.
- **Slap on a wide – brimmed hat:** This will shade your face, ears and neck from the sun.
- **Seek shade:** Especially if outdoors between 11am and 3pm.
- **Slide on sunglasses** with UV protection: Guard your eyes from harm.

Even when it is cloudy, you should protect your skin as the sun's UV rays can travel through cloud. Also important to remember do not deliberately try to get a suntan. Avoid getting a sunburn. Never use a sunbed.