

QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF SUNBURN

Summary findings of qualitative research with a cross section of people of different ages and social demographic status to explore attitudes to sunburn and its relationship with skin cancer, and to inform the development of bespoke targeted messages.

1. Background, Method and Sample

This research was prompted by the sense that there is a lack of understanding among the public about what sunburn is, and the long term damage it does. The findings were to inform the development of bespoke targeted messages and resources around sunburn, including local campaigns where appropriate.

CM Insight were contracted by Cancer Research UK to conduct a qualitative investigation to

- assess knowledge, attitudes and understanding of sunburn among adults and teenagers in the UK
- explore specifically
 - i. experience of sunburn and language used to describe it
 - ii. understanding of sunburn/beliefs around sunburn
 - iii. health risks of sunburn
 - iv. messaging around sunburn

The research took place in November/December 2008.

32 groups were conducted across five different locations: Leeds, Manchester, Bristol, North London, Sunbury. In total:

- 12 x 90 minute groups with adults (6-8 respondents in each)
- 20 x 60 minute groups with teenagers (4-6 respondents in each)

Further details of the groups were as follows:

Adults:

- 2 x women aged 19-30, no children
- 2 x men aged 19-30, no children
- 2 x women with children aged 0-4
- 2 x men with children aged 0-4
- 2 x women with children aged 5-15
- 2 x men with children aged 5-15

Teenagers:

- 2 x girls aged 13-14
- 2 x boys aged 13-14
- 2 x girls aged 15-16
- 2 x boys aged 15-16
- 2 x girls aged 16-17
- 2 x boys aged 16-17
- 2 x girls aged 17-18
- 2 x boys aged 17-18

Half the groups were BC1, half were C2D.

All respondents were interested in getting a tan; most had normal/fair skins. All had had a holiday in a hot climate in the past three years.

Findings and recommendations contained in this report are derived solely from this investigation.

2. Summary of findings

- Experience of sunburn is **extremely widespread**, in the sense that virtually everybody can recall suffering it at some point
- Some is **accidental** (falling asleep is a common cause); some is while **actively sunbathing** (eg when desperate to get a tan on first or last day of the holiday, or following poor weather)
- Shoulders/back are key parts susceptible to burning; also arms, legs, feet and unprotected parts of head
- **Sunburn in the UK is not uncommon** – as people tend to underestimate the power of the UK sun, and often do not automatically carry sunscreen
- The physical pain of sunburn, as well as its consequences for the holiday, can be considerable
“I had third degree burns on my shoulders...had to go to hospital...it ruined the holiday”
(girl, 17-18, C2D, North London)
- On the other hand, many – especially younger people – believe that **a bit of redness is just part of the tanning journey**
“To get a tan, you have to go red first – then you go brown.”
(girl, 15-16, BC1, Bristol)
- Superficially, many believe that skin heals itself, but at a deeper level **the news that sunburn damage is long term is not surprising**: it does have a sinister logic; moreover young people may have been taught at least a part of it (with references to UV radiation) in science lessons
- The link between sunburn and skin cancer is spontaneously made; media, school, and sun-related products have contributed here
- **However, there is little understanding about how one can cause the other**
- For example, there is much talk of sunburn ‘destroying’ skin cells, and little sense of it triggering change/mutation
“The UV rays are killing the outside of the skin cells”
(boy, 16-17, BC1, Leeds)
- The lack of understanding about how sunburn can actually cause skin cancer is part of the reason people to some extent dismiss the link from their conscious minds
- Other reasons for disregarding the link include the general hedonism of the young, and a disconnect between actions now and consequences later
- Yet in most groups there was at least one reference to someone known to have had either a mole removal or cancer itself
- Parents, especially of 0-4s, are overall generally very careful to protect their children from the sun
- **The key danger segment for sunburn is teenagers/young adults**, away in the sun with their peer group, and in a more risk-taking frame of mind

- Messages which hit home involve: emphasising how dangerous even **occasional** burning is, and referring to cell/DNA damage

3. Notable differences in the sample

- **Parents of 0-4s** appear to be, for the most part, assiduous in protecting their young children; ‘covering up’ and applying sunscreen is a major ritual, sometimes at the expense of themselves
- **Parents of 5-15s** still play a big part in their children’s protection, but over time gradually lose control
- **Teenagers** pull away around age 13-15, often starting to want a tan at this point, and in all ways striving for independence from parents; come 16-18 they are often holidaying alone with peers – a context in which the greatest risks are taken
- **Young adults** (19-30) are also likely to prize having a tan and may also take risks in the sun, along with abusing their health in various other ways; but as they approach 30 a greater sense of responsibility kicks in
- **Gender differences include:**
 - girls/young women:**
 - more preoccupied with tans; put in time and effort; engage with SPFs
 - some lie out and bake; others are more careful – may follow mothers’ advice
 - boys/young men:**
 - less preoccupied with tans; more ‘take it or leave it’
 - rely on mum/girlfriend for protection; can be cavalier
 - but may show more interest in the ‘science’ of sunburn
 - mothers:**
 - take more responsibility for children’s protection
 - are also more likely to be aware of the long term ageing effect of sun
 - fathers:**
 - tend to take less care with their own protection (‘do as I say, not as I do’ – to children)
 - C2D fathers the least likely to know much in relation to the sun and cell damage
 - social class tendencies:**
 - BC1s generally take more of a long term perspective; generally more aware of health issues, and inclined to ‘believe’ if from trusted source; BC1 dads are more hands-on with children
 - C2Ds typically more ‘live in the moment’; aware of scare stories but may have rationalisations; some cynicism from the men; but C2Ds overall equally protective of young children

4. Specific communication recommendations

- **Most at risk are young people: teens and young 20s of both genders, and across social class**
 - Need to speak to, and empower, them in their language
 - An **explanation** of the link is crucial, as for most this is currently missing: the fact that UV is radiation and damages the DNA in skin cells, which can cause cells to grow out of control, as in cancer; and that the damage is unseen and permanent
 - **In style**, the communication should be **hard hitting; concise; avoid preachiness; use graphic imagery; signpost what people should be doing, and the SunSmart website**
- **C2D adults could be a secondary target, particularly men.** Again, the most powerful messages here are specifics demonstrating that that even mild/infrequent sunburn can significantly increase the risk of skin cancer.