

Crew Health: Protecting your skin on board

Did you know that skin is our largest and fastest growing organ? It has three crucial functions:

Protection: The skin acts as a barrier from temperature variations, micro-organisms and chemicals.

Regulation: The skin helps us to maintain an optimum body temperature through the use of hair and sweat.

Sensation: The skin has an extensive network of nerve cells that help to detect changes in the environment and alert you to high or low temperatures, and pain.

Being such an important organ it is imperative that skin is protected and taken care of. Being on board ships can result in long periods of time working outside, sometimes in regions where the sun's intensity can be high. This article highlights key factors that can harm skin while on board, and provides advice on how to protect and take care of skin.

The effect of the sun on skin

Exposing skin to appropriate amounts of sunlight is essential for health as it provides Vitamin D which helps the body absorb calcium and phosphate, fundamental for strong and healthy bones. However over exposure to sunlight also carries with it risks and can cause a range of diseases as highlighted by the [World Health Organisation](#) (WHO):

- **Sunburn and other skin changes:** sunburn ranges from skin reddening to severe and painful blistering of the skin.
- **Cataract of the eye lens:** opacities in the eye lens lead to decreased vision and eventual blindness.
- **Skin carcinoma:** several types of malignant skin tumours of the non-melanoma type are caused by UV radiation.
- **Malignant melanoma of the skin:** this is a very severe cancer that can develop many years after excessive exposure to the sun.

There are many measures that can be taken to ensure time spent in the sun is beneficial, not detrimental, to personal health. This is especially helpful for crew on board ships, who often have to work in hot climates, on deck with exposure to sun. The WHO recommend:

- **Limiting time in the midday sun:** The sun's UV rays are strongest between 1000hrs and 1400hrs (2 hours each side of the solar noon).

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- **Using shade wisely:** Seek shade when UV rays are the most intense. The shadow rule: “Watch your shadow – short shadow, seek shade!” may be helpful.
 - **Wearing protective clothing:** A hat with a wide brim and tightly woven, loose-fitting clothes, provide protection from the sun. Sunglasses that filter all UV-A and UV-B radiation will greatly reduce the risk of eye damage.
 - **Using sunscreen:** A broad-spectrum sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 30+ should be used, and should be reapplied at least every two hours. This can help reduce the skin-damaging effects of UV radiation. Remember, don’t prolong your stay in the sun even if you have used sunscreen.
 - **Knowing the UV index:** The UV index is a measure of UV radiation. The higher the UV index, the higher the risk of skin and eye damage. Use the UV index to plan sun-safe outdoor activities. When the UV index predicts radiation levels of 3 (moderate) or above, sun safety precautions should be taken.

Chemicals

Chemicals are often used in ship operation, cleaning and maintenance. If skin is exposed to chemicals side effects such as drying and irritation of the skin, permanent skin damage, allergic reactions and more serious side effects such as cancer can occur.

It is recommended that protective clothing should always be worn when working with chemicals.

Keep moisturised

On a day to day basis moisturising is essential for healthy skin. Moisturisers should be applied day and night, and ideally following a shower or bath as the moisturiser is able to trap some of the moisture and use it to hydrate the skin.

ISWAN has developed three posters to help highlight skincare best practice on board. All three posters can be downloaded from the right hand side of this page.

Claims related to illness are frequently notified to the Club, with the number of claims reported remaining steady in number over the last five policy years. The Club has [partnered](#) with the International Seafarers’ Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN) to raise awareness of crew-related illness and to assist our Members in mitigating against related incidents. This article is the fifth in a series of articles in which the Club shares guidance and practical tips to our Members to promote good crew health on board. [All articles in this series can be viewed here.](#)