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Kiwis harming themselves in the sun with world-worst melanoma rates



A new study has found New Zealand has the worst rates of invasive melanoma in the world.

Kiwi medical experts have called for urgent action to lower the melanoma rate in New Zealand, which is now the worst in the world.

Researchers have found that New Zealand has overtaken Australia as the most melanoma-prone country, with the highest per capita rates of invasive melanoma in the world.

Invasive melanoma is the "deadliest form of skin cancer", capable of invading the body and spreading.

The study - conducted by researchers from QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute in Brisbane and published in *The Journal of Investigative Dermatology* - found that New Zealand now has an invasive melanoma rate of 50 cases per 100,000 people.

"The researchers found that while Australia's melanoma rates have been declining since 2005, New Zealand's rates are still increasing and are not expected to start falling until about 2017," a statement from the Queensland researchers said.

In New Zealand, in response to the study's findings, melanoma experts are calling for increased action by the government to fight the cancer battle.

Associate Professor Tony Reeder of the Department of Preventive and Social Medicine at the University of Otago said New Zealand "has lacked high-level commitment to, and adequate investment in, skin cancer prevention" for more than a decade.

That needs to change, he said.

Melanoma was identified in 2002 as a priority for the "New Zealand cancer control strategy".

"Our politicians dropped the ball and unless there is increased funding and a high-level commitment, more New Zealanders than Australians will continue to develop potentially preventable skin cancers," Reeder said.

"Despite growing evidence that skin cancer prevention initiatives can help avoid melanoma and save lives, governments have not been willing to adequately fund them."

An example of lack of government commitment, Reeder said, was the fact that commercial cosmetic sun beds had not been banned in New Zealand, despite the Australian Government banning them across the Tasman.

Reeder is a member of MelNet, a network of professionals working to reduce melanoma in New Zealand.

Bay of Plenty-based dermatologist Dr Ben Tallon, speaking on behalf of both MelNet and cancer charity Melanoma New Zealand, said the Government needed to "wake up" to skin cancer prevention.

"This study should be a wake-up call. Skin cancer prevention initiatives are highly cost effective and an important public health investment. It's an investment the New Zealand Government must make."

In the study, Queensland researchers compared the rates of melanoma in six countries over 30 years, between 1982 and 2011, and then used recent trends to predict the skin cancer rates between 2011 and 2031.

The six populations used in the study were Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Norway, Sweden, and the Caucasian population of the United States.

The researchers found that melanoma rates in New Zealand increased from about 26 cases per 100,000 people in 1982 to about 50 cases per 100,000 in 2011.

Australia's melanoma rates, by contrast, peaked at about 49 cases per 100,000 people in 2005 and declined to about 48 cases per 100,000 people in 2011.

The study anticipated New Zealand's melanoma rates are now peaking at about 51 cases per 100,000 people and "will start to decline from next year and reach about 46 cases per 100,000 people by 2031".

Australia's rates were expected to keep falling to about 41 cases per 100,000 people by 2031.

While New Zealand's melanoma rates per 100,000 people were expected to start declining, the overall number of invasive melanomas diagnosed in New Zealand each year would keep increasing.

Professor David Whiteman, who led the study, said this was down to population growth and an aging population.

"Melanomas occur most commonly in older people. Unfortunately for older New Zealanders alive today, most will have already sustained significant amounts of sun damage before the prevention campaigns were introduced.

"Those people are developing melanomas now, many decades after the cancer-causing exposure to sunlight occurred," he said.

"As New Zealand's population ages, the number of melanomas diagnosed will continue to increase. While it's good news that average melanoma rates in New Zealand should start to fall soon, the fact that the actual number of cases will keep rising is bad news."

Whiteman said it was crucial that people of all ages did their best to avoid the sun during the hottest part of the day and otherwise protected themselves from the sun by wearing a hat, protective clothing and sunscreen.

"As the numbers of people being diagnosed with melanoma increase, governments will need to invest significant amounts of funding in melanoma treatment in the years to come. A strong case can therefore be made to invest more in melanoma prevention," Whiteman said.

The study found the number of people dying from melanoma was also increasing across all six researched populations, but was highest in Australia and New Zealand.

- Stuff