PUBLIC HEALTH COMMUNICATION CENTRE AOTEAROA

Aotearoa’s skin cancer crisis: The case for sun safety action

20 October 2025

Bronwen McNoe, Katrina Patterson, Rachael Neumann, Amanda Dodd

Summary

Each year, Aotearoa New Zealand's (NZ) health system treats tens of thousands of skin cancers, the country's most common cancer. This places a significant and avoidable burden on our healthcare system and economy, costing approximately $450 million annually. Despite these costs, government investment in prevention remains critically low at approximately $300,000 per year, one quarter of what it was two decades ago. Excessive exposure to solar ultraviolet radiation (UVR), the primary modifiable risk factor, remains poorly addressed in many schools, workplaces, sports settings, and local government.

This Briefing outlines key challenges and opportunities for strengthening sun safety policy, drawing on recent research and strategic recommendations. It highlights gaps in implementation across key settings and calls for stronger enforcement and sustained investment to reduce UVR exposure and improve public health outcomes, and make skin cancer prevention a national priority.

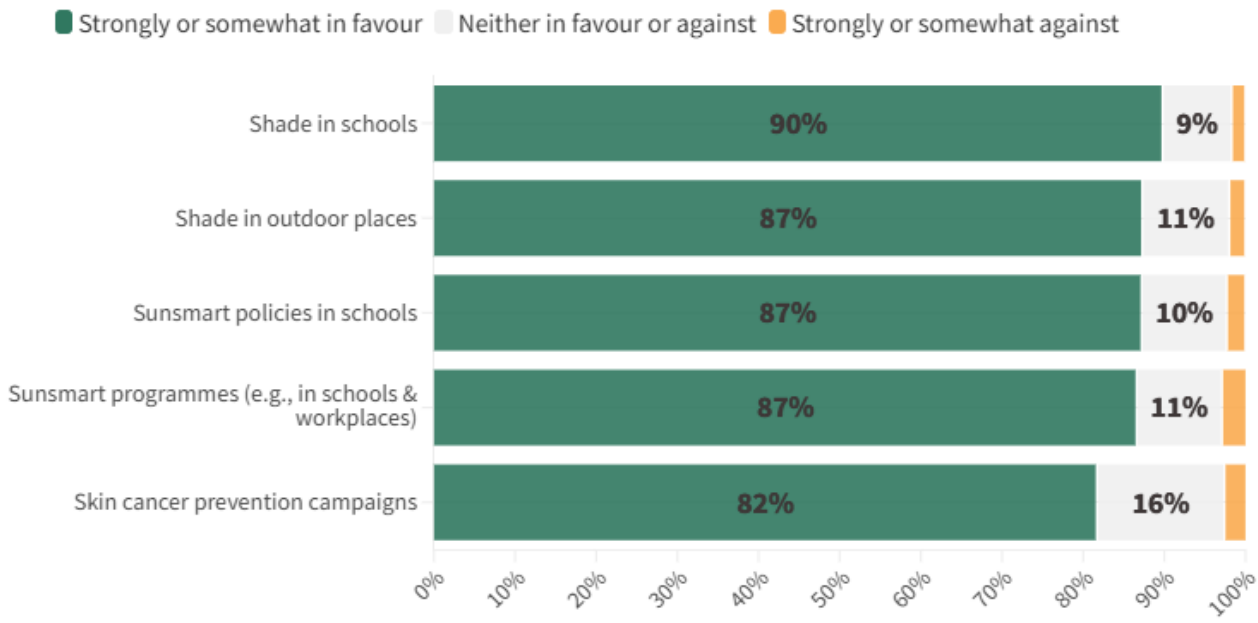
Skin cancer affects two in three New Zealanders at some point in their lives, making it one of the country's most common and preventable health conditions.[1] The financial impact is considerable, with treatment costs exceeding $450 million each year. Reducing exposure to UVR is essential to prevent skin cancer and improve public health outcomes. Effective policy interventions are especially important in settings where New Zealanders are regularly exposed to the sun, including schools, workplaces, sports organisations, and local government.[2] These environments offer strategic opportunities to implement sun protection measures that can influence behaviour, reduce UVR exposure, and ultimately decrease the burden of skin cancer across the population.

Government prioritisation of and investment in skin cancer prevention remains critically low. Current funding from Health New Zealand is approximately $300,000 per year, just one quarter of what was allocated two decades ago.[1] This lack of adequate investment undermines efforts to reduce incidence and highlights the urgent need for stronger policy commitment and sustained funding.

Public support for government investment in skin cancer prevention initiatives is very strong. A recent nationally representative survey found that 87% of New Zealanders support a comprehensive SunSmart programme, 82% favour of a national SunSmart campaign, and 88% back targeted programmes in settings such as schools and workplaces (see Figure 1).[3] Support for increasing shade in outdoor spaces is also high, with 87% supporting shade provision generally and 90% specifically backing shade in schools. Fewer than 3% opposed any of the initiatives. These findings demonstrate a clear public mandate for strong government action and investment in sun safety measures.

Figure 1. Support for Government investment in skin cancer prevention initiatives

Percentage of New Zealanders **in favour of** or **against** initiatives.



Source: Sunsmart in Aotearoa New Zealand Survey
Based on sample of 2,198 NZ adults, data collected in March/April 2025 via Dynata. Weighted to match NZ population on age, gender and ethnicity.

In the education sector, legislation mandates safe environments, yet UVR protection is inconsistently addressed. The removal of UVR from the Education Review Office's Board Assurance checklist in 2024 highlights a concerning gap. Many schools use SchoolDocs, an online platform which provides up-to-date customised policies, including those related to sun safety.[4] While these policies set clear expectations for sun protection, sustained funding is needed to ensure schools can implement them effectively.

Workplaces expose thousands of workers who work outdoors to harmful UVR, yet sun safety remains a low priority in occupational health. UVR is the second most common workplace carcinogen, but it is not currently a strategic focus for Worksafe.[4,5] Fewer than half of outdoor workers report that their workplace has a sun protection policy, and only about half report that their employer provides sun protective items such as hats or sunscreen.[3] These figures highlight persistent gaps underscoring the need for stronger regulatory guidance and consistent employer responsibility in protecting outdoor workers from UVR exposure. Although tax incentives exist for employers, employees bear the cost of sun protection products when these are not supplied.

Sports settings also show limited policy uptake. Only 12 of 71 National Sporting Organisations include sun protection measures, with just two meeting best practice standards.[6] Given the high UVR exposure in outdoor sports, comprehensive policies and implementation plans are urgently needed.

Local government plays a vital role in providing shade in public spaces. However, only six of 67 territorial authorities have UVR policies.[2] Integrating shade into urban planning offers co-benefits, including carbon sequestration and improved mental health for New Zealanders. Many recreational areas within the local governments' mandate lack adequate shade.[7]

Product standards are also essential for effective sun protection. While the Sunscreen Standard is mandatory in NZ, standards for sunglasses, and clothing remains voluntary and there is no standard for shade fabrics.[2] The repeal of the Therapeutic Products Act 2023 undermines regulatory progress in sunscreen regulation as a therapuetic product.

Commercial sunbeds pose significant health risks. Although they are banned for individuals under the age of 18 in NZ, they are dangerous at any age.[8] Despite these risks, only two councils currently require sunbed operators to be licensed.[2] Advocacy continues for a complete ban, aligning with Australia's approach, where a nationwide prohibition has been implemented to protect public health.

Skin cancer is one of New Zealand's most common and preventable cancers, affecting two in three people. Despite its significant health and financial burden, government investment in prevention remains critically low. Strategic action is needed across high-exposure settings, including schools, workplaces, sports, and public spaces, through stronger policies, improved product standards, and better regulation. Public support is overwhelmingly strong, and survey results indicate a clear mandate for increased government leadership and funding in sun safety.

What is new in this Briefing

- There are gaps in sun safety policy implementation across key settings
- There is strong public support for interventions in sun safety

Implications for policy and practice

- Prioritise UVR protection in school, workplace, local government and sporting organisations health and safety policies.
- Mandate sun protection standards for relevant products.
- Advocate for local government responsibilities for shade provision.
- Ban commercial sunbeds to reduce skin cancer risk.

Authors details

Dr Bronwen McNoe, Department of Preventive and Social Medicine, Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka | University of Otago

Katrina Patterson, Chief Executive of the Melanoma Network of New Zealand

Rachael Neumann, Head of Advocacy and Public Affairs for the Cancer Society of New Zealand.

Amanda Dodd, Advocacy and Public Affairs Lead at the Cancer Society of New Zealand

Competing interests

Dr McNoe is co-lead director of Te Rōpū Rangahau ō Te Kāhui Matepukupuku - Cancer Society Research Collaboration which is funded by the Cancer Society.

References

1. Melanoma Network of New Zealand. New Zealand Skin Cancer Prevention and Early Detection Strategy 2024-2028. Christchurch: Melanoma Network of New Zealand; 2024. Available from: https://melnet.org.nz/.
2. McNoe B. Sun safety policy implementation in Aotearoa New Zealand: current landscape and progress. *Journal of the Royal Society*. 2025. 55(5):1222-1234 https://doi.org/10.1080/03036758.2025.2501000
3. McNoe B, Gray A, Iousua E. Sunsmart in Aotearoa New Zealand: Knowledge, Attitudes & Behaviour towards Sun Protection & Ultraviolet Radiation Exposure. Summary of Research Findings. Research contracted by the Cancer Society of New Zealand and Health New Zealand. Dunedin, New Zealand: Te Rōpū Rangahau ō Te Kāhui Matepukupuku - Cancer Society Research Collaboration; 2025.
4. Melanoma Network of New Zealand. New Zealand Skin Cancer Prevention and Early Detection Strategy 2024-2028 - supporting documentation. Christchurch: Melanoma Network of New Zealand; 2024. Available from: https://melnet.org.nz/.
5. Worksafe. New Zealand Carcinogens Survey 2021. Overview. 2023. Available from: https://www.worksafe.govt.nz/research/new-zealand-carcinogens-survey-2021/.
6. McNoe BM, Marsh L, Venter N, Morgaine KC, Reeder AI, McLean RM. National Sporting Organisation Policies: A health promotion opportunity? *Health Promot J Austr*. 2022; 2022 (Mar 31):1-8. http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/hpja.601.
7. Te Rōpū Rangahau ō Te Kāhui Matepukupuku - Cancer Society Research Collaboration. Skin cancer https://www.otago.ac.nz/cancer-society-research/skincancer. Accessed 18 September 2025.
8. Boniol M, Autier P, Boyle P, Gandini S. Cutaneous melanoma attributable to sunbed use: Systematic review and meta-analysis. *BMJ*. 2012; 345:e4757. http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.e4757.

Public Health Expert Briefing (ISSN 2816-1203)

Source URL:
https://www.phcc.org.nz/briefing/aotearoas-skin-cancer-crisis-case-sun-safety-action