

Sunbed users in New Zealand: Results from the 2010 Health and Lifestyles Survey

Background

The World Health Organization (WHO) recently defined solariums, or sunbeds, as carcinogenic (capable of causing cancer) to humans. Sunbeds emit ultraviolet radiation (UVR), sometimes at rates much higher than natural sunlight, and are used for cosmetic purposes to tan the skin.

In 2009 the International Agency for Research on Cancer – which is part of the WHO – called on all governments to regulate sunbed use (WHO 2010). New Zealand currently has a voluntary standard for sunbed operators, incorporating recommendations such as ensuring all sunbeds are supervised and not allowing people under the age of 18 or with the fairest skin types to use them. Surveys by Consumer New Zealand have, however, found a high level of non-compliance with these standards (Consumer NZ 2010).

To find out more about what's happening in New Zealand, respondents to the Health Sponsorship Council's (HSC's) 2010 Health and Lifestyles Survey (HLS) were asked whether they had used a sunbed in the previous 12 months.

Research Details

Rate of sunbed use

- Overall, 2.8% of respondents aged 15 years and over (one in 36 respondents) said that they had used a sunbed in the last 12 months. This proportion is equivalent to around 92,000 people using sunbeds in New Zealand.

Demographic differences

- There was no difference between the proportion of males (2.7%) and females (2.8%) who reported using sunbeds.
- The 25 to 34-year-old age group had the highest proportion of sunbed users (7.9%). People aged 55 and over (1.7%) and 15 to 24 (1.3%) had the lowest rate of sunbed use. None of the respondents aged 15 to 17 reported having used a sunbed.
- The differences in sunbed use between people of different ethnicities were not significant. 5.1% of Asian people, 3.4% of Māori, 2.4% of people of European/Other ethnicity and 1.9% of Pacific peoples had used a sunbed.
- People with medium (3.3%) and olive (5.1%) skin types were more likely to report using sunbeds compared with people of other skin types. Among the sunbed users, 83% had either medium or olive skin. Only one in seven (14.5%) sunbed users had fair skin.
- Nearly all sunbed users lived in urban areas. A greater proportion of people in Auckland (5.9%) reported using sunbeds, compared with people in other areas of New Zealand.



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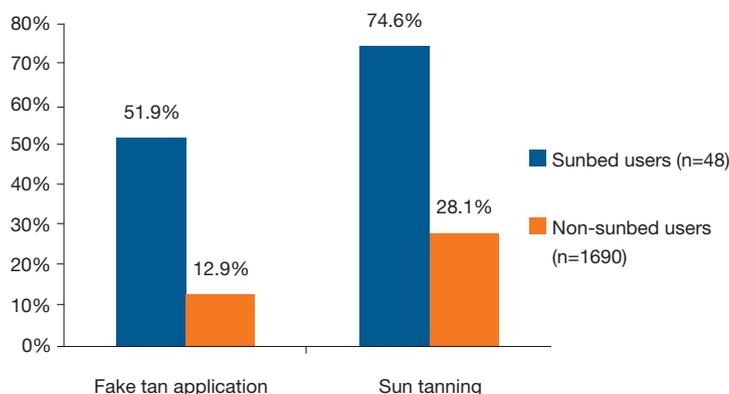
What else did sunbed users do to tan?

Sunbed users were significantly more likely than people who did not use sunbeds to report using other means of tanning.

- 51.9% of those respondents who had used a sunbed had also applied fake tan in the last 12 months, while only 12.9% of those who had not used a sunbed had used fake tan.
- 74.6% of people who had used a sunbed had also tried to get a sun tan at some point during the previous summer. In comparison, 28.1% of people who had not used a sunbed had tried to get a sun tan.

Despite having the lowest rate of reported sunbed use, respondents aged 15 to 24 had the highest rate of trying to get a sun tan compared with people in older age groups - 41.5% had tried to get a sun tan during the previous summer.

Figure 1. Other tanning activities done by sunbed users and non-sunbed users in previous 12 months



Sunburn

Respondents were asked whether, in the previous summer, they had been severely sunburnt (defined as sunburn that causes blisters or pain that lasts at least two days) or experienced any reddening of the skin after being in the sun.

- 29.8% of sunbed users reported having had a severe sunburn, while 12.3% of those who had not used a sunbed reported having had a severe sunburn.
- 78.4% of sunbed users had experienced some degree of sunburn the previous summer, compared with 50.0% of those who had not used a sunbed.
- Sunbed users were around 3.5 times as likely as non-sunbed users to have experienced a sunburn the previous summer.

Vitamin D awareness and sunbed use

- Over half (52.6%) of sunbed users said that they had, in the last six months, heard a news report or information about getting vitamin D from sunlight, compared with just over a quarter of non-sunbed users (26.7%).



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Comment

It is encouraging to note that most people who are more vulnerable to damage from UVR – those with the fairest skin types – are not using sunbeds.

It is, however, worrying to see that sunbed users tend to be putting themselves more

at risk of UVR damage generally. The involvement of sun bed users in other activities such as sun tanning, and the fact that they experienced sunburn at a higher rate than other people, shows that people who like having a tan may be putting themselves at risk in multiple ways.

About the Survey

- The HLS is a nationwide in-home face-to-face survey conducted every two years, starting in 2008. The 2010 HLS consisted of a sample of 1,740 New Zealanders aged 15 years and over, who provided information about their health behaviours and attitudes relating to tobacco, sun safety, healthy eating, gambling, and alcohol.
- In 2010, the main sample, with a response rate of 57%, included 1,067 people of European/ Other ethnicity, 460 Māori, 326 Pacific peoples and 124 Asian people (total response ethnic groups).
- The data have been adjusted (weighted) to ensure they are representative of the New Zealand population.
- A full description of the 2010 HLS survey methodology, questionnaire and further HLS publications can be found online at www.hsc.org.nz/researchpublications.html.

The HSC is a crown entity that uses health promotion initiatives to promote health and encourage healthy lifestyles, with a long-term focus on reducing the social, financial and health costs of a number of health behaviours.

References

Consumer NZ (2010) *Survey of sunbed operators* <http://www.consumer.org.nz/reports/sunbeds/introduction>

World Health Organization (2010) *Sunbeds, tanning and UV exposure – Fact sheet #287* <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs287/en/>

Citation

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