

Dark side of the sun



We are all exposed to the sun from birth, but I think that few of us are really aware of the real dangers that ultraviolet light (UV) can cause to the skin. In countries where the sun is strong, such as the Middle East and the Far East, traditional clothing is used to protect the body from the sun. In countries such as Australia and South Africa, health education is such that as much as possible is done to protect from the sun from an early age.

This is not so in the UK. In summer, when the ultraviolet light is strong, most of the population takes little notice of sun protection advice, and in the winter months there is a trend for many young people to visit tanning salons to top up their tan.

For pilots and cabin crew this is exacerbated by the intensity of the sun that they are exposed to voluntarily and involuntarily in the course of their job.

Repeated exposure

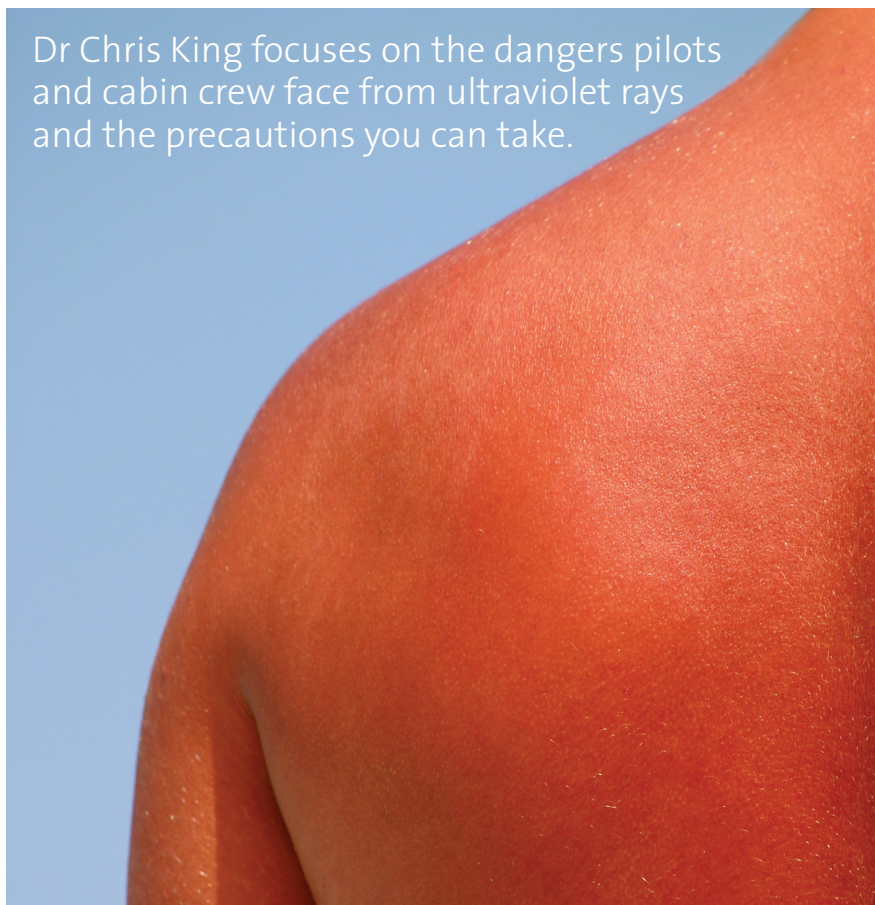
When down route, the crew like to sunbathe, but they are potentially exposing themselves to large amounts of UV light. When undertaking a walk-round on the aircraft, there can be intense reflected light from the terminal, aircraft and apron. In the cockpit, the window glass protects from UV light.

Flight crew, and especially cabin crew, have some of the highest rates of malignant melanoma, the most severe form of skin cancer of all. Recent statistics show that more women die from skin cancer than cervical cancer.

Sun damage produces long-term problems apart from initial sunburn. Prolonged and repeated exposure destroys the supporting layer (dermal collagen), which leaves the skin permanently and prematurely wrinkled. The skin can then develop a freckled appearance and subsequently there is a risk of varying blemishes and sun spots (solar keratoses), and then the risk of different types of skin cancers including squamous cell carcinoma and malignant melanoma.

The mainstay of prevention is to avoid burning at all costs and to stay out of the mid-day sun. UV light can easily penetrate a sunshade. There is an over-reliance on sun blocks and a misconception that they will protect

Dr Chris King focuses on the dangers pilots and cabin crew face from ultraviolet rays and the precautions you can take.



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from all problems. They may prevent burning and block the rays of the UVB light, but probably do nothing to protect from UVA and visible light, which may be the cause of melanoma skin cancer. By assuming protection from a sun block one might be inadvertently increasing the risk of skin cancers as one continues to be exposed to the sun's UV rays.

Do not rely solely on the sun block, keep out of the sun and have adequate protective clothing.

Added risk

There are many sun blocks available, I would choose as high a factor as possible, but any factor would be better than none at all. I also feel that aircrew should use a sun block on a regular basis, on any part of their skin that is exposed to the sun during

every working day. Keep an eye on any blemishes or moles (so called 'mole patrol') and checking there is no change in their characteristics. This is especially important for aircrew who have the added risk of occupational exposure.

Be aware of any change in the character of a mole – for example, if it becomes more than seven millimetres across; its pigmentation increases; it changes from a regular to an irregular outline; or if it itches or bleeds.

Most importantly, anyone who is the slightest bit concerned about any mole or blemish should seek medical advice, especially if there is any change. In this electronic age, it can help to take a digital photo with a ruler nearby so that comparisons can be made from time to time. Aircrew should be particularly vigilant. ■