RCH NATIONAL
Child Health POLL

The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne

Teens and tans: How sun safe are Australian teenagers?

Poll report

Poll 39, December 2025

Report highlights

- Almost three quarters (72%) of teens report being sunburnt at least once over a six month period, with close to half (44%) burnt multiple times.
- Pro-tanning attitudes are common among teens, with half (49%) saying they prefer to look suntanned and one in four (23%) falsely believing a tan protects against skin cancer.
- The majority of teens (60%) did not use adequate sun protection when outdoors during peak UV times.
- Only one in four teens (22%) know how to tell when sun protection is needed.
- A third of teens (33%) mistakenly believe that you have to get sunburnt often to be at increased risk of skin cancer.

Sunburn frequency

Sunburn is common among children aged 12 to 17 years (teens). Approximately three in four (72%) teens said they had been sunburnt at least once in the six months from December 2024 to May 2025. Over a quarter had been burnt once (27%), a quarter twice (27%), 10% three times and 8% four or more times (see *Figure 1*). There was no meaningful difference in the frequency of sunburn between males and females or by age. Slightly more teens from regional and remote areas (78%) reported being sunburnt once or more, than teens from metro areas (70%).

Teenagers who had been sunburnt at least once in the six month period, reported on the characteristics of their worst sunburn. Half (51%) said the sunburn was red without being tender or painful. Half (49%) had more severe sunburn – 41% had red and tender or painful sunburn and 8% had red, blistered and painful sunburn. There was no meaningful difference between demographic groups in the severity of sunburn.

Sun protection behaviours

One third of teens (38%) said that sun protection was not part of their 'daily routine in summer' despite UV forecasts reaching high, very high or extreme levels across Australia during summer.

Based on advice from experts, when the UV index is 3 or more, people should protect themselves from the sun's UV radiation by using five forms of sun protection – clothing covering arms and legs, wearing a wide-brim hat, sunglasses, sunscreen and shade.[1]

We asked teens how often they performed each of these five recommended sun protection behaviours when they were outdoors for more than 15 minutes between 10am and 2pm (peak UV hours) during the most recent summer, the summer of 2024–25. Consistent with other surveys of sun protection in Australia, we classified teens as being adequately protected from the sun if they performed at least three of the five recommended behaviours often or always with one of the behaviours being either wearing sunscreen or a broad-brimmed hat.[2]

Teens reported that sunscreen was the most common form of sun protection and was used often or always by 59% of teens, followed by staying mainly in the shade (45%), covering 3/4s of arms, (39%), wearing sunglasses (38%), covering 3/4s of legs (35%) and wearing a broad-brimmed hat (35%).

The majority of teens (60%) were not adequately protected from the sun last summer, with just two in five (40%) using three or more forms of sun protection. Teens with different skin tones reported slightly different levels of adequate sun protection behaviour: teens with fair skin reported the lowest level at 39%, similar to those with medium or olive tones (40%) and lower than those with brown or black tones (48%).

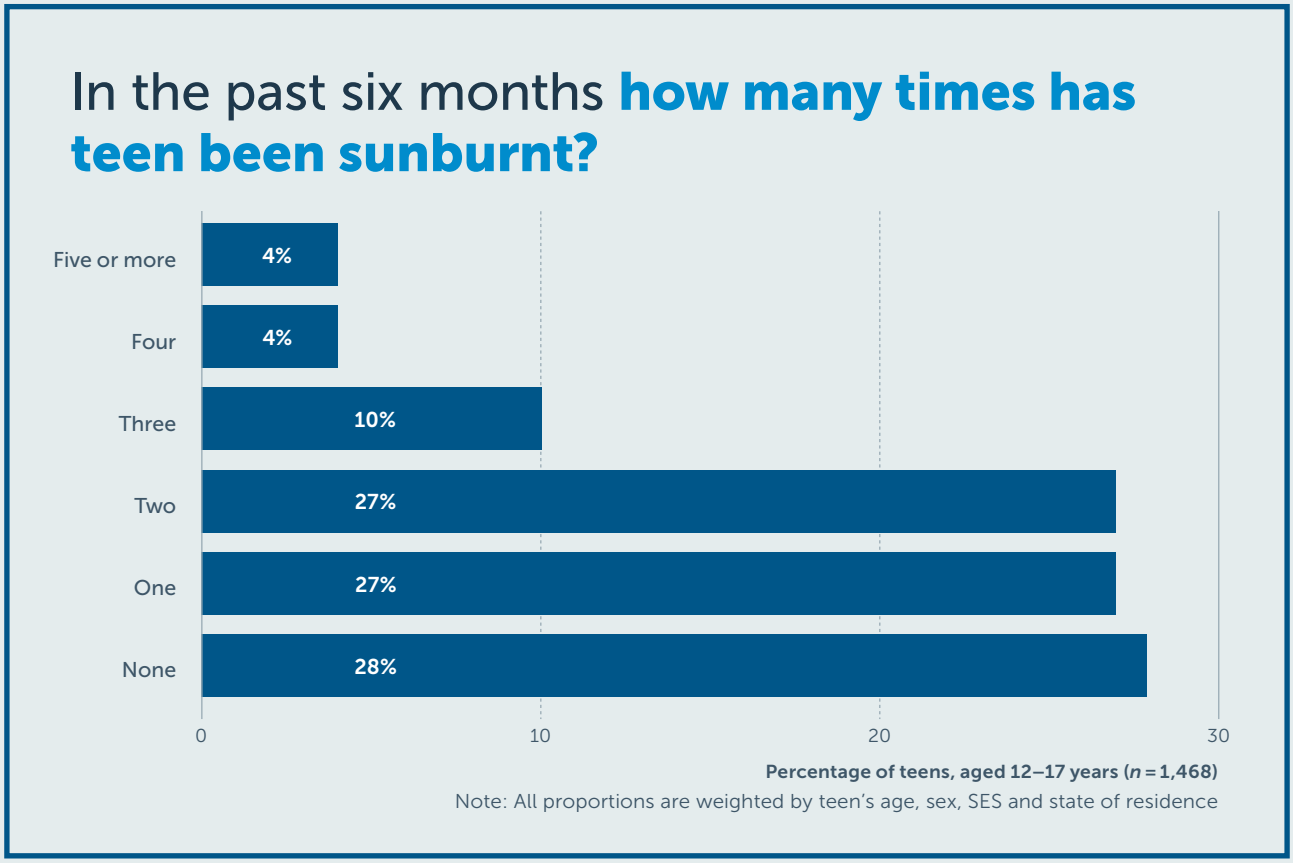

Figure 1.

The proportion of males (40%) and females (41%) regarded as being adequately protected from the sun was similar. There was, however, some variation in sun protection by age. Fourteen-year-olds were the most likely to be adequately protected (47%) compared to younger teens (40% of 12-year-olds, 36% of 13-year-olds) and older teens (42% of 15-year-olds, 40% of 16-year-olds and 36% of 17-year-olds).

In households where a language other than English was spoken, 46% of teens were adequately protected over summer, compared to 39% of those in English-speaking-only households.

Sun protection behaviour among teens differed when considering the country of birth of parents and their migration history. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of teens living in households, where at least one parent was born overseas and migrated to Australia within the past five years, were adequately protected from the sun. This was notably higher than among teens whose parents had migrated five to nine years ago (45%), 10 or more years ago (42%), or were born in Australia (39%).

Sun protection knowledge

Knowledge of when sun protection is required is key to skin cancer prevention. Teens were asked if they used any weather forecast information to help them decide when sun protection was needed. One in three (32%) of teens said they used the UV index forecast but the majority (90%) could not correctly identify the UV level at which sun protection was needed. Of all teens surveyed, only 5% used the UV index and knew that sun protection was required when it reached three. Twenty percent of teens said they used the forecast 'sun protection' times which are published online. Overall, 22% of all teens surveyed knew when sun protection was required; that is, they correctly used forecast UV levels or 'sun protection times'.

Teens hold a range of beliefs and misbeliefs about sun protection. Just under half of teens (45%) either mistakenly believe (23%) or are not sure (22%) if ingredients in sunscreen are bad for your health. One in four teens (25%) believe that people who use

Teens' views on sun protection and suntans

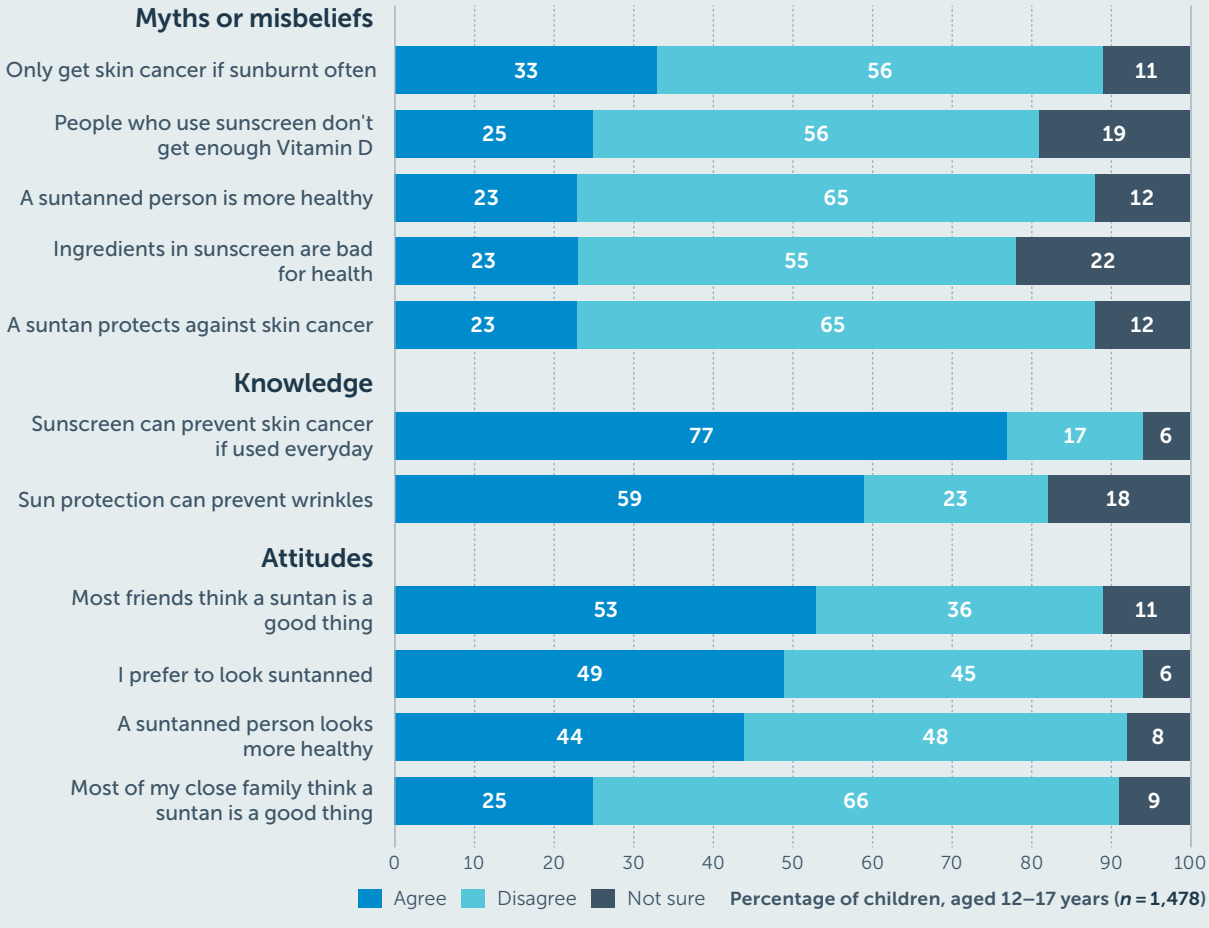

Figure 2.

sunscreen regularly don't get enough Vitamin D and one in five are not sure (19%). Three in five (59%) recognise that if they regularly protect themselves from the sun, they can prevent wrinkles (see *Figure 2*).

Sunburn and skin cancer

Skin cancer is one of the most preventable cancers and its main cause is exposure to UV radiation. Teens were asked a range of questions about their knowledge and attitudes in relation to sun and skin cancer. Only about half (56%) of teens know that you do not have to get sunburnt often to be at increased risk of skin cancer. One in three teens (35%) mistakenly believe or are not sure if a suntan protects against skin cancer and one in four do not know or are not sure if daily use of sunscreen (23%) can prevent skin cancer (see *Figure 2*).

Teenagers and tanning

Teenagers were asked a range of questions about their behaviours, beliefs and attitudes towards tanning. More than one in three (37%) children aged 12 to 17 years said they had intentionally tried to get a tan from the sun at least once during the six-month period from December 2024 to May 2025. Tanning behaviour was more common among females (43%) than males (31%), and older teens (42% of 15 to 17-year-olds) compared to younger teens (33% of 12 to 14-year-olds). Respondents were asked about their natural skin tone without any sun exposure. Of teens with fair skin tones, 35% had tried to get a tan compared to 40% with medium or olive tones and 25% of brown or black tones.

Desirability of tanning and pro-tan attitudes

Half of all teenagers (49%) said they prefer to look suntanned, with a further 6% unsure. Just under half of teenagers (44%) believe a suntanned person looks more healthy and one in ten (8%) is unsure if they do. Almost one quarter (23%) of teenagers believe that a suntanned person is actually more healthy and 12% are unsure. Half (53%) of teenagers say their friends think a suntan is good and one quarter (25%) believe that most of their close family think it is good (see *Figure 2*).

Beliefs and attitudes reflecting the desirability of tanning were more prevalent in certain demographic groups. Over half of females (55%) prefer to look tanned compared to 44% of males, as do teens from regional and remote areas (53%) compared to those from urban areas (48%). Older teens were more likely to think a suntanned person looks more healthy (51% of 17-year-olds compared to 36% of 14-year-olds) and females (47%) compared to males (41%). When considering if a suntanned person is more healthy, more teens from metro areas (25%) hold this belief, compared to those from regional and remote areas (18%).

Almost three quarters (72%) of teens report being sunburnt at least once over a six month period.

Parents, tanning and sun exposure

We asked parents about their attitudes and behaviours in relation to tanning and sun protection for themselves and their children aged 12 to 17 years. Two in five (42%) parents believe that a suntanned person looks more healthy and one in six (16%) believe they actually are more healthy. One quarter falsely believe that ingredients in sunscreen are bad for your health (26%). One quarter (25%) believe that people who use sun protection don't get enough Vitamin D. In relation to skin cancer, almost one in five parents (19%) believe that skin cancer can be easily treated because it can be cut out and one in four (26%) mistakenly believe or are unsure if a suntan protects from skin cancer.

Almost all parents (87%) say they make it a priority to remind their teen to use sun protection, but for just over half of parents (53%) this can cause disagreements. Knowledge among parents of when sun protection is actually required is low, with just 14% of parents knowing it is required when the UV index is 3 or more. Approximately half of parents (51%) think their teenaged child's school should be responsible for making sure their child is protected from the sun.

Only 5% of teens know the UV index at which **sun protection is needed**.

Implications

This report highlights a concerning public health issue: the majority of Australian teenagers are not adequately protecting themselves from exposure to the sun's UV radiation, significantly increasing their risk of developing skin cancer. Sunburn is very common, with three in four teens reporting at least one instance of sunburn during a six-month period including the summer of 2024–25. These results likely represent a best-case scenario due to the potential for under-reporting but nonetheless equate to an estimated 750,000 young people affected nationally.[3] Sunburn, particularly in childhood and adolescence, is a major risk factor for skin cancer. Australia has one of the highest rates of skin cancer in the world and over 95% of skin cancers are caused by overexposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation.[4] Eighty percent of all cancers diagnosed in Australia in 2023 were skin cancers, despite it being one of the most preventable types of cancer.[5]

Sunburn and overexposure to UV radiation among teens are likely to be influenced by their attitudes toward tanning and limited understanding of sun safety. Sunburn is a form of skin damage that occurs after too much exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation, usually from the sun although it can be from a solarium.[6] It often causes redness, warmth, swelling, and sensitivity in the affected area. In more severe cases, sunburn can lead to pain and blistering. This study reveals that half of teens who were sunburnt over a six-month period reported more severe sunburn, putting them at risk of immediate and long-term health concerns.

Less than half of teens report being adequately protected from the sun over the summer of 2024–25. There are many factors that may contribute to this, including the widespread desirability of tans, low levels of knowledge about skin cancer, perception of risk, sun safety practices and inconsistent habits.

Tanning continues to be desirable, and many teens and parents mistakenly believe that 'a suntanned person is more healthy'. These findings suggest that there is more work to do in raising awareness as one third of teens continue to seek a tan – possibly without fully recognising the associated risks. Tanning can give a false sense of security as it provides minimal protection from the sun and reduces the use of sun protection measures.[7] There is no such thing as a safe tan.[7] Research suggests that tanning itself can become addictive, adding to the risk of ongoing skin damage.[8] Children need to be educated from an early age about the risks of sunburn and tanning to reduce the likelihood of sun damage. Our study highlights the need for targeted education for teens that addresses both knowledge gaps and the social perceptions and norms that drive tanning behaviours.

While many teens have likely heard sun safety messages, they may not fully understand them or when they need to implement them. This study found that only one fifth of teens accurately used weather forecast information (UV index of 3 or sun protection times) to know when to use sun protection. The most common sun protection behaviour used by teens in this study was sunscreen, although it was only used by about half of teens and often not in conjunction with other sun safety measures recommended by experts.[1]

Although almost all parents make it a priority to remind their teen to use sun protection, many also hold misbeliefs about sun protection, skin cancer and tanning. Parents are well motivated to encourage their children to use sun protection; however, the vast majority do not know the UV index at which sun protection is needed, with many thinking it is higher than it is.

This study reveals concerning attitudes, behaviours and knowledge gaps among teenagers regarding sun protection. It reinforces the urgent need to broaden health promotion efforts – not only targeting teens but also reaching children at earlier ages when habits are formed. Sun-protection policies should be introduced in environments where teens learn and play, given their frequent exposure to peak UV radiation during extended periods at school and during sports. SunSmart has developed high-quality resources that clearly explain when and how to use sun protection.[9] To maximise their impact, schools and public health organisations across Australia should actively promote these tools and collaborate to ensure consistent and regular messaging. Equipping teens with the knowledge and habits to protect themselves from UV exposure is essential to reducing both immediate harms, such as sunburn, and long-term risks, including melanoma.

Data source and methods

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by the Online Research Unit for The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne. The survey was administered from 20 to 28 May 2025 to a randomly selected nationally representative sample of Australian parents aged 18 years or older by age, sex and state of residence. All parents had at least one child aged 12 to 17 years of age who was also invited to participate in the survey. The survey comprised two questionnaires – one completed by a parent or caregiver, and the other by their child aged 12 to 17 years. For parents with more than one child in the target population, one child was randomly selected to participate. Both parents and children responded to close-ended questions assessing their knowledge, attitudes and behaviours in relation to tanning and sun protection among adolescents. The response rate among eligible parents was 91%, with 2,012 completing the parent questionnaire. Of these, 1,488 (74%) provided consent for their child aged 12 to 17 years to participate. All 1,488 children whose parents consented agreed to participate and completed the child questionnaire, resulting in 1,488 parent–child dyads. The estimates presented in this report are based on these 1,488 children and the 2,012 parents who completed their respective questionnaires. The data have been weighted to reflect the demographic distribution of the Australian population, using figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

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