Sun Safety

What Parks & Recreation (P & R) Staff Should Know

Sun Safety is Important!

Safety issues are an important concern for P & R administrators and staff. They review, plan and implement numerous safety measures related to swimming pools, playgrounds, maintenance procedures, and drug/weapon-free activities to protect both staff and patrons. Yet sun safety is often neglected, despite the sun's dominant, daily presence in the sky.

This oversight persists despite the fact that one in five Americans is expected to get skin cancer in his or her lifetime, chiefly caused by exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation in sunlight. With over one million new cases expected this year, skin cancer is now considered an epidemic. Each year there are more new cases of skin cancer than the collective total of new cancers of the prostate, breast, lung and colon! In addition to skin cancer, excessive exposure to sunlight can cause accelerated aging (wrinkles and blotches), cataracts, and a weakened immune system.

Children are Particularly Vulnerable to Sunlight

During the first ten years of life, a child's skin is especially vulnerable to solar radiation. Just one or two blistering sunburns during childhood significantly increase a young person's future risk of getting melanoma, the most deadly form of skin cancer. Tanning also injures the skin. For both children and adults, tanning is an outward sign of internal skin damage. The idea that a tan indicates health is a social myth, not a factual reality.

P & R staff have a health and ethical mandate to help protect their patrons, especially children, from excessive and unprotected sun exposure. Young people need special protection since up to 80 percent of an individual's lifetime sun exposure occurs by age 20, at least for young people who work indoors as adults.

Skin Cancer Rates are Rising

Skin cancer rates have more than doubled in the last few decades from these and other factors:

- Increased leisure time devoted to outdoor activities
- Decrease in the coverage of clothing worn
- National population migration to sunnier states
- Decreasing amounts of stratospheric ozone that partially protects the earth's surface from receiving cancer-producing UV radiation.
- Tanning is falsely viewed as healthy
- General aging of the population

Three Major Forms of Skin Cancer

There are actually more than 200 types of cancer that may appear in the skin. The three major forms of skin cancer are basal cell carcinoma (BCC), squamous cell carcinoma (SCC), and malignant melanoma – the deadliest form. Skin cancer can develop anywhere on the body but most often appears on surfaces receiving the greatest amount of sunlight. BCC and SCC often take the form of a pale, wax-like, pearly bump or a red, scaly, sharply outlined patch. The patches may crust, discharge pus, and sometimes bleed.

If not treated early, SCC may spread to other parts of the body. Less than one percent of people with SCC or BCC will die from skin cancer. For many individuals, these two skin cancers can cause some disfigurement based on the amount of damaged skin the physician must remove or alter. Fortunately, the potential negative effects of surgery or other treatments can be greatly minimized when diseases are treated in their early stages.

Malignant melanoma is the most dangerous form of skin cancer. It often arises from or near a mole. An individual should see his or her doctor (especially a dermatologist) if he has a mole or growth that has any one of these features:

- If divided in half, the two resulting parts would not have the same shape.
- It has jagged or rough edges.
- It has two or more colors (which may be mixed together).
- It is wider than a standard pencil eraser.

Melanoma does not necessarily appear on parts of the body exposed to sunlight. While light-skinned people have a greater risk of getting melanoma, this disease is growing among people of color.

Timing and Environmental Sun Safety Issues

UV radiation is more intense under certain time frames or conditions:

- From 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
- From mid-spring through mid-fall
- When there is lack of thick cloud cover
- At higher altitudes

It is important to remember that outdoor recreation areas – especially between 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., from March through October – can be likened to a radiation chamber. Also, reflective surfaces like water and glass can direct additional UV rays toward people.

Personal Risk Factors

While skin cancer can afflict any individual – regardless of skin color – light-skinned people are at highest risk. Individuals most likely to succumb often have some of these characteristics:

- Fair skin
- Blue, green, or hazel eyes
- Light-colored hair
- Freckles
- A tendency to burn rather than tan
- A history of severe sunburns
- Have many moles (over 50-100)
- A personal or family history of skin cancer
- Outdoor worker

The Mandate for P & R Staff Action

Since many P & R staff spend much of their day outside, and numerous patrons participate in outdoor activities, P & R management have a strong imperative to integrate sun safety principles and practice into daily operations (see the accompanying sun-safe policy template). Besides protecting people's health, this approach can help guard against potential liability and litigation resulting from skin cancer or severe burns experienced by either P & R staff or patrons.

Skin Cancer Prevention

The recommended strategies for reducing skin cancer risk are:

- Reduce sun exposure from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., when UV rays are strongest. (This is especially important from mid-spring through mid-fall.)
- Wear a wide-brimmed hat (at least 4-inch brim) that produces a shadow that covers the eyes, nose, ears, and neck.
- Wear tightly-woven, loose-fitting clothing that covers as much of the body as possible, weather permitting.
- Find shade (tree, physical structures) to shield you, especially from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Shade tip: When possible, reconfigure recreation settings so that play areas and equipment are protected by shade.
- Use sunglasses that include a warranty stating they provide 100 percent UVA and UVB (broad-spectrum) protection. Prescription glasses can have an UV- protective coating applied to the lens.
- Liberally apply sunscreen to exposed skin one-half hour before going outdoors. The sunscreen container should have a sun protection factor (SPF) rating of 15 or above and should state that it provides broad-spectrum (UVA and UVB) protection. PABA-free sunscreens are recommended for persons with sensitive skin. Depending on outdoor conditions, sunscreen should be reapplied at least every two hours.
- Individuals with sensitive skin may want to test a new sunscreen on a small portion of skin to see if any negative reactions occur in 24 hours.
- Use lip balm with a SPF or 15 or greater.
- Avoid tanning salons, booths, and sunlamps.

CAUTION!

Don't depend on sunscreen alone to protect children and adults from skin cancer. Instead, rely as much as possible on a combination of all the tips listed.

P & R staff should model sun protective behaviors and actively encourage patrons to do likewise. Staff may want to utilize a skin cancer prevention "buddy system" to reinforce and support their commitment to practice sun safety. Skin cancer prevention education materials should be sent home with younger patrons so parents will become informed and encourage their children to utilize sun protection strategies.

On a personal level, P & R staff should use a hand mirror to perform a self skin examination every one to three months to check moles and other possible signs of skin cancer as previously described. See a dermatologist if you suspect any problems. Skin cancer is relatively easy to treat if it is diagnosed in its early stages.

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