

The Sun, Another Construction Site Hazard

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With the sun the primary cause of skin cancer, construction laborers, who work outside most of the time, are at high risk for this disease. However, because their risk of accidental death and injury on the job is not only higher, but also more immediate, the dangers of skin cancer in this industry have long been neglected.

Nevertheless, over the last eight years, in response to concerns raised by a local union representing highway workers in the sun-filled desert of Nevada, we at the Laborers' Health and Safety Fund of North America (LHSFNA) have succeeded in motivating members of the Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA) to protect themselves against this common and often deadly disease.

Mike Cackowski worked in construction for 20 years, but it was not a fall or cave-in that ultimately injured him — it was skin cancer, the result of day after day spent outdoors in the sun. Fortunately, for him, as a result of the skin cancer awareness program developed by LHSFNA, he detected the melanoma at an early stage. It was treated promptly and cured.

Dangerous Work

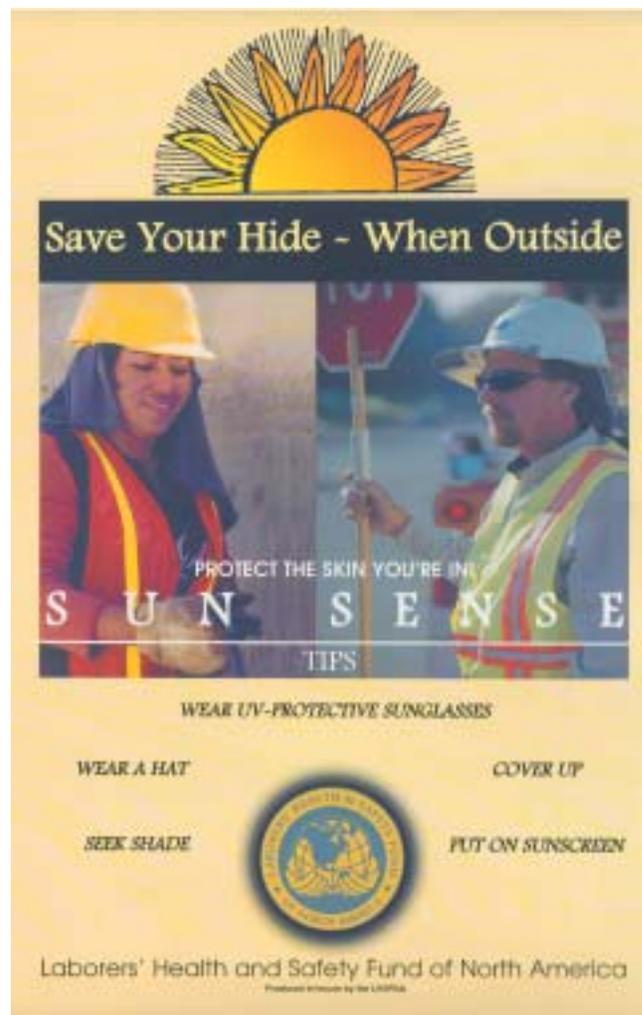
Construction work is dangerous. It has the third highest death rate from injuries of all American industries (13.3 per 100,000 full-time workers) and by a large margin, the most fatalities of any sector.¹ Within construction, the death rate for laborers is more than three times the average for the entire industry.² Numerically, construction kills far more laborers than does any other craft.³ That said, it is hardly surprising that laborers do not readily recognize the need to protect themselves against skin cancer.

Outdoor Workers Face Increased Risk

Exposure to solar radiation is the single most significant risk factor for the development of skin cancers of all sorts, including deadly melanoma. In 1995, the Conference to Develop a National Skin Cancer Agenda specifically identified outdoor workers as a high-risk group worthy of targeting. They experience twice the number of nonmelanomas (basal cell carcinomas and squamous cell carcinomas) as indoor workers.⁴

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The male orientation of the industry affects the probability of skin cancer. While women are entering this field in increasing numbers, the vast majority (91%) are men.⁵ In the U.S. population at large, men have a 40.9% greater (1.72 vs. 1.22) chance of developing melanoma than do women.⁶ Moreover, as a survey of Americans confirms, younger people, particularly young men, are less likely to use sunscreen than older persons and if they do, are less likely to use a product with SPF 15 or greater.⁷



From Coal Tar to Smoking

Occupational risk factors for skin cancer include exposure to coal tar, pitch, creosote, arsenic compounds and radium.⁸ Coal tar and pitch exposure occur regularly in asphalt paving and other highway work, and creosote is found in treated lumber often used in construction.

A lesser-known risk factor is cigarette smoking. Evidence suggests a link with squamous cell carcinoma.

It is also associated with a poor prognosis for melanoma, especially among males.⁹ Unfortunately, the percentage of smokers among blue-collar workers and laborers in particular is higher than for the general population.^{10,11}

It is the outdoor work, itself, however, that most often puts construction workers at risk for skin cancer. The Skin Cancer Foundation and other health organizations urge limited or no exposure to the sun during the mid-day hours from 10 am to 4 pm. Yet, construction laborers typically work from 7 am to 3 pm and frequently put in overtime during the longer days of summer.

The Industry and the Union

Because of the intermittent nature of construction work, management in most construction companies has irregular direct involvement with individual workers. The union (LIUNA) helps fill this void for its membership. Founded in 1903, it represents approximately 800,000 workers, most of them in construction.

LIUNA and its management allies operate training centers for skills development. Last year, more than 86,000 construction workers were trained in 70 centers throughout North America. While the bulk of this training is oriented to production skills, issues of safety and health, including sun protection, are also addressed.

LHSFNA, a labor-management fund, was created in 1988 to foster better health behaviors among laborers and their families, both on the job and at leisure, and to reduce workplace injury and illness.

The “Most Common Health Complaints”

“Through the years, the most common health complaints I became aware of were skin cancers and hearing loss, particularly in older members who have been laborers for many years,” says Dan Rusnak, former business manager and health fund trustee of northern Nevada’s LIUNA Local 169.

He described the case of a 74-year-old man who had spent his career as a construction surveyor in a high desert area under a blistering sun. This year alone he had 93 skin cancers taken off his forehead, arms, neck and the backs of his hands.

At Rusnak’s urging, a skin cancer awareness program was developed that focuses on incidence, causes, and risk factors as well as detection, prevention and treatment. It offers a training package, *Sun Sense: Skin Cancer Control for Laborers*. The issue of skin cancer is also raised in tool-box talks – brief jobsite meetings – and safety meetings which are routine on unionized construction jobs.

An Overwhelming Response

When the Fund provided neck flaps that can be secured to a cap or a hardhat, the response was overwhelming. The Fund distributes 10,000 of them a year.

“The men are not *lotion-oriented* and will not take the trouble to buy bottles of sunscreen at the store,” reports one LHSFNA staffer. A small, unscientific survey of laborers found that only 10% used sunscreen on a regular basis, significantly lower than the national average of 26%.¹² Still, when the Fund introduced laborers to sunscreen by distributing small individual packets at the *Sun Sense* classes and through local union halls, these were snapped up. A wipe-on towel that contains both sunscreen and insect repellent was even better received. Soon, there was a deluge of requests for sunscreen for training centers, membership meetings, health fairs, member picnics and even charity golf tournaments. In 2002, 25,000 packets of SPF 30 sunscreen were distributed. Wall dispensers are mounted at the training centers and laborers are encouraged to apply lotion before their simulated outdoor work training sessions.

The issue of skin cancer is raised in tool-box talks.

In 2001, the Fund began to distribute SPF 30 lip balm, as the lower lip is a common site for skin cancer.

Clint Taylor, Training Director for a laborers’ training center in Mt. Sterling, IL, says: “I never thought a laborer would pay any attention to sunscreen. Boy, was I ever wrong about that. The older guys understand because they’ve heard the stories and seen the evidence. They know it’s important to talk about this, especially to younger guys who think they’re invincible.”

OSHA Regulations

In 1992, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) issued an interpretation to their Personal Protective Equipment standard stating that employers have a duty to protect workers who are exposed to solar radiation on the job. While the standard “does not necessarily” require employers to provide sunscreen to their employees, “some form of protection such as wide-brimmed hats and long-sleeved clothing” must be used.¹³

Advice to cover up does not get an immediate favorable reaction, as those who work in the heat are forever seeking ways to keep cool. However, the more seasoned members confirm that they keep cooler when covering up, even in the summer.

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Construction Laborers (Continued from page 25)

Clothing also has value in protecting the skin against caustics, debris, and sharp objects common on construction sites.

Sun Protection and Screening

A good primary indicator of the success of the union's program is the overwhelming and ever increasing demand for skin protection products, as well as for classes and educational materials. Another indicator is the American Academy of Dermatology's Gold Triangle Award presented in 1997.

According to many *Sun Sense* instructors, every time a class is taught, a union member approaches to ask advice. Kelly Lapping, director of the Laborers' training center for the Washington, DC area, sat in on a *Sun Sense* class during a health fair. Afterward, he approached the instructor about some moles, and she advised him to see a dermatologist. "The moles were atypical," Lapping says, "I consider myself lucky. Now, I get check-ups on a regular basis and encourage my trainees to take advantage of cancer screening opportunities."

The Future for Laborers in the Sun

Now that the need for sun protection is recognized, union members tell one another the stories of laborers who have spent their lives working outdoors in construction only to face a retirement of fear, repeated surgery and, sometimes, a sad and painful death due to skin cancer. That does not need to happen.

Given the other significant and more immediate risks faced by laborers and their daily needs and priorities, neither the members nor the union leadership would focus on this issue unless the need and interest were clearly present.

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