

There are no safe tans

According to media reports from the Australian Health and Medical Research Congress in Brisbane last month, human trials of the first skin cancer vaccine might start as early as next year.

Australia has the world's highest rate of skin cancer with about 400,000 people being diagnosed with the condition each year; of this number there are around 1600 deaths. So there is the potential for many lives to be saved.

Professor Ian Frazer, former Australian of the Year, has led the research team in developing the vaccine for skin cancer. And as with the jab now given to millions of young girls each year to prevent cervical cancer (the vaccine for which was also developed by Professor Frazer), children between the ages of 10 and 12 would be offered the skin cancer vaccine.

However, as promising as this sounds, it is certainly no cure for skin cancer. Firstly, the vaccine is likely to be effective against only one of the skin cancers, namely so-called squamous cell carcinoma.

Squamous cell is the second most common skin cancer. Less common, but more deadly are melanomas; and it's yet to be determined as to whether the vaccine will offer any protection against melanomas.

Secondly, it is likely to be many years before the vaccine has been proven suitable and safe and generally available for human use.

Meanwhile, protecting the skin from UV radiation (that is sunlight) is the best course of action. And remember, the adverse effects of sunlight on the skin are cumulative. The damage on and beneath the skin is building up, even without burning.

Research undertaken by the Cancer Council and the Australian Department of Health and Aging shows that it's not just the day, or even several days, at the beach that causes the most sun damage to our skin. The many days spent involved with everyday activities, without adequate protection from the sun, might be even more dangerous. And with most states in Australia now "saving daylight", there is the possibility we will have more usable leisure time in the sunshine.

Results of the survey indicated that Australians were much more likely to get sunburnt at home than anywhere else. So even "accidental tanning" is a risky business.

Perhaps that's not so surprising. The survey showed that while around 8% of Australians regularly went to the beach at the weekend, nearly 30% spent time gardening or working around the house.

If you're 55 years old or more, you were probably in your 30s when the need for skin protection became well recognised; and most of the damage to your skin had already taken place.

Of course, it's not too late to look after your skin now; but you also need to check your skin regularly for any new spots or a change in appearance of those existing spots.

If you must have a tan, a fake tan is the best option. There are a number of products your pharmacist can recommend which offer a much safer alternative to the sun-induced variety. But, remember, the colour from a fake tan does not provide protection against UV radiation. And fake tan products that contain a sunscreen only provide protection for a few hours after application – not for the duration of the tan.

You can get more advice and a *Sense in the Sun* Fact Card on how to stay sun smart this summer, from pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society's Self Care health information. Phone 1300 369 772 for the location of your nearest Self Care pharmacy.