

Prevalence of Recent Skin Examinations in US Worker Groups: The National Health Interview Survey (NHIS)

Objectives

Research has demonstrated that even among US workers with access to medical care, most healthcare providers do not evaluate occupational exposures and their potential impact on the health of US workers. Substantial evidence has shown a link between ultraviolet (UV) light exposure (both occupational and recreational) and various forms of skin cancer. Furthermore, regular skin examination can serve as a preventive health message, as well as a method of detecting early skin cancers for which removal can be curative. This study explored the prevalence of reported skin examination among US workers with access to medical care, particularly among occupations with high occupational UV exposure.

Methods

Using the nationally representative National Health Interview Survey (NHIS), the 2000 NHIS Cancer Control Module was used to determine the reported prevalence of receiving a skin examination among current workers who had visited a healthcare provider in the past 12 months. This was examined by occupation and evaluated by gender, race, and ethnicity.

Results

The NHIS study population represented an estimated 126,970,317 US workers annually between 1997-2003. Among the US workers participating in the 2000 NHIS Cancer Care Module, the annual reported prevalence of visiting a healthcare provider during the past 12 months was 63%. Among workers who did visit a healthcare provider in the past 12 months, on average 13% (range 4%-29%) reported receiving a skin examination. Among all workers in 41 occupations, the groups with typically elevated occupational exposure to UV light were less likely to have received a skin examination than the average US worker. In particular, Farm operators and managers (10%), Farm workers and other agricultural workers (6%), Forestry and fishing occupations (5%), Construction and extractive trades (7%), and Construction laborers (4%) had a decreased prevalence of skin examination, while white collar workers (e.g. Health diagnosing professions 29%) with less occupational UV exposure risk reported substantially increased access to skin examination. There were also variations in the reported access to skin examination by gender, race, and ethnicity among the different US worker subpopulations.

Discussion and Recommendations

Regular skin examination by a healthcare provider, particularly among highly UV exposed workers, can be preventative and curative for skin cancer. The low reported prevalence of skin examination among some of the most highly exposed workers who did have health care system contact is a reflection of the lack of knowledge on the part of healthcare providers. Furthermore, 37% of workers reported no contact with the health care system in the previous 12 months. Decreasing access to medical insurance among US workers may serve to further lower skin examination rates and other preventive health services in the coming years. This example of lack of preventive care among US workers has substantial implications for their occupational health and for the ultimate cost of their medical care for US society.