

NEAR MISS

Something more important to do

Skin Cancer

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Make sun protection part of every working day

At 65, dairy farmer Clinton is outgoing and positive, with a lifetime of farming behind him. He took over the dairy from his mum and dad in his thirties, and there were always cows to milk, jobs to finish and something more important to do. His experience with skin cancer has made him rethink where his own health belongs on that list.

Growing up and during his early working life, Clinton often ran around the farm without a hat or shirt. After leaving school, time working outdoors was coupled with trips to the beach, swimming and baking in the sun. He remembers his mother giving him a dressing-down when he came home sunburnt. He does not recall sunscreen being part of their routine.

At 26, a spot on his leg prompted his mother to send him to the doctor. It was diagnosed as a basal cell carcinoma (BCC) and removed.

Clinton says from that point he didn't go without his broad brimmed hat or shirt outdoors. Over time he started to adopt wearing long-sleeved shirts and longer shorts while working. He also grew a beard, thinking it might help protect his face. However, further skin cancers followed.

Over the years, Clinton had a number of basal cell carcinomas treated at his local surgery. Then at age 47, a spot near his shoulder blade kept returning and would not heal. It was diagnosed as a squamous cell carcinoma (SCC). After repeated procedures in the same area, his doctor recommended radiation therapy.

The treatment meant significant changes for Clinton and his family. The nearest treatment centre was two and a half hours away. With a dairy to run, it might as well have been in another country. Clinton and his family reduced the number of cows so they could manage while he was away.

Although each individual treatment was quick, the preparation, travel and time away from the farm added up. He was fortunate to be able to stay in accommodation provided by the Cancer Council and attended treatment Monday to Friday over several weeks. Clinton says the treatment centre staff were amazing and did their best to schedule his Monday appointments late in the day and his Friday appointments earlier so he could return home for weekends. Clinton speaks warmly of their care, but by about halfway through the treatment, he really started to go downhill.

"It really hit me," he recalls. "I just needed to sleep and had no energy. The burning sensation in my back was intense."

After the 36 radiation treatments targeting the cancer on his back, Clinton was given the 'all clear'. Regular skin checks every three months became the norm and he began to feel more confident that further treatment was behind him.

Then he found a lump beneath his beard.

He couldn't get to the surgery quick enough where they diagnosed a stage 1 melanoma on his face. Two operations were needed to remove it completely. Clinton was deeply grateful it had been caught at stage 1, but the diagnosis shook him.

"The squamous cell carcinoma and radiation worried me, but finding the melanoma really knocked me. Seems like I'm going to have to live with the potential of more cancers for my whole life. This one could have been really bad if it hadn't been caught."

A greater risk

Machinery, chemicals, and animals are familiar hazards on dairy farms, but the sun's invisible ultraviolet radiation (UVR) also needs attention. Given the nature of their work, farmers and agricultural workers experience chronic occupational exposure to solar UV radiation, at levels estimated to be six to eight times greater than indoor workers.1

This increased exposure to UV radiation increases the risk of skin cancer, including melanoma - one of the most serious forms of skin cancer leading to Australian farmers having a 60% higher mortality rate from melanoma than other Australians. 1

Sun exposure and skin cancer: key facts

- UV radiation cannot be seen or felt. Skin damage can occur without sunburn, including on cool or cloudy days.
- UV damage builds up over time. Repeated exposure during everyday farm work adds to your lifetime risk of skin cancer.
- The UV Index measures the strength of UV radiation, from low (0–2) to extreme (11+). UV levels vary with location, time of day, season, altitude and cloud cover. Reflective surfaces, such as water, can also increase exposure.
- Sun protection is recommended when the UV Index reaches 3 or above. Outdoor workers should use protection year-round, even when UV levels are below 3.
- Anyone can develop skin cancer. Risk is higher for those people with fair skin that burns easily, freckles, many or unusual moles, or a personal or family history of skin cancer. There is still risk however, if you have a darker skin tone.
- Most skin cancers can be prevented by reducing UV exposure.
- Early detection improves treatment outcomes. Get to know your skin, have new or changing spots checked promptly, and discuss your individual risk and skin-check needs with your doctor.

- It is never too late to protect your skin. Sun protection still matters, even after years of exposure or a previous skin cancer diagnosis.

Knowing the risks is one thing; protecting your skin through a busy day on the farm is another. Long sleeves feel hot, sunscreen attracts dust, shade can be hard to find—and there's always something else demanding attention. Australian research shows these practical frustrations, along with forgetting, can get in the way of sun protection. Many farmers understand why it matters. The challenge is making it comfortable, convenient and as automatic as pulling on your work boots.

What's getting in the way?	What can help
"Long sleeves and trousers are too hot."	Trial lightweight, breathable work clothing with a sun-protection rating of UPF 50 or 50+ that allows movement. Involve the team in choosing it, and support its use with shade, drinking water and breaks.
"Sunscreen feels greasy, has a strong fragrance and attracts dust."	Trial different SPF50+ broad-spectrum, water-resistant types to find one employees will use. Cover more skin with suitable clothing, and use sunscreen on exposed areas.
"I forgot" "I was busy"	Make sun protection part of getting dressed for work. Provide supplies where work starts and breaks happen. Place sunscreen at different points, such as the sign-in and PPE areas. Carry sunscreen to outlying jobs and store it according to the label, away from excessive heat. Build reapplication opportunities into the working day. Put your hat with your boots at the end of the day.
"The hat blows off or gets in the way."	Trial well-fitting broad-brimmed or legionnaire-style hats suited to the task. Check that protection works with required helmets, hearing protection and other safety equipment.
"Sunglasses fog up, slip down or make it harder to see."	Trial comfortable, well-fitting, wraparound UV-protective sunglasses with lenses suited to the task and light conditions. Where eye protection is required, choose safety-rated eyewear with UV protection. Keep them clean and store them with your hat so they're ready to wear.
"The work has to happen"	Move flexible tasks to lower-UV periods and use covered areas for suitable jobs. Provide shade at frequently used work and rest areas, while keeping other protection in place.
"It's cloudy and cool, I don't need it."	Include the UV forecast in daily planning. Download an app that monitors the UV index at your location. Reinforce that temperature does not indicate UV strength and outdoor workers need protection year-round.
Sun protection is not routine.	Owners and supervisors can set the example, provide suitable products and make sun protection an everyday expectation for everyone.

Making sun protection a habit takes more than telling your employees (and yourself) to cover up. It means choosing clothing that is comfortable to work in, keeping sunscreen within reach, providing shade where practical and allowing time to use protection properly. Ask your team what gets in the way, then work together to address it. The easier sun protection is to fit into the job, the more likely it is to become part of everyday farm life.

Get to know your skin, including areas that are difficult to see. Ask someone to help check your back and scalp, and see your doctor promptly about any new, changing or non-healing spot. Don't wait for your next scheduled skin check. Your doctor can advise how often checks are needed based on your individual risk.

Clinton still grows a beard but now shaves it off completely on the day of his skin check so the skin underneath can be examined. He cannot change the sun exposure of his younger years, but he hopes his story will encourage others to act sooner. On a farm, there will always be another job waiting. His experience is a reminder that looking after yourself deserves a place on that list.

I asked Clinton what he would tell his teenage self if he had the chance. His message was simple: start protecting your skin early and make your health a priority.

"The more people that realise, the better. Start young and take the time to not only cover up but go and get your skin checked. There's nothing more important to do."

Keep it Simple

Being SunSmart and following these five sun protection steps can help reduce your risk of developing skin cancer:

- ✓ Slip on a long sleeve shirt and long pants
- ✓ Slop on SPF 50+ sunscreen to all skin not protected by clothing
- ✓ Slap on a broad brim hat
- ✓ Seek shade between 11am – 3pm
- ✓ Slide on 100% UV protective sunglasses[2]

The facts about Melanoma

Melanoma is particularly dangerous because it can grow deeper into the skin and spread to lymph nodes and vital organs, including the lungs, liver and brain. Once it spreads, treatment becomes more complex and the cancer can be life-threatening. When detected and treated early, melanoma can often be removed successfully with surgery—making prompt attention to new or changing skin spots essential. 3

- 1 Australian is diagnosed with melanoma every 30 minutes
- It is estimated 1300 Australians will die from melanoma this year
- Melanoma is the third most common cancer in Australia
- Melanoma is the most common cancer for Australians aged 20 to 39
- Melanomas are caused by overexposure to UV radiation from the sun
- If caught early, 90% of melanomas can be cured by surgery[4]



The ABCDE of Melanoma Identification (Image credit: Melanoma Patients Association)

References *1. Fletcher, C.M.E., Trenerry, C., Wilson, C. and Gunn, K.M. (2024) "Being a farmer, I mostly always think there is something more important to do": A mixed methods analysis of the skin cancer detection practices of Australian farmers', Health Promotion Journal of Australia, 35(3), pp. 672–682. Available at: doi.org/10.1002/hpja.796 (Accessed: 28 September 2026). 2. National Centre for Farmer Health (2026) Skin cancer – risks and early signs. Available at: farmerhealth.org.au/skin-cancer-risks-and-early-signs/ (Accessed: 29 September 2026). 3. Cancer Council Australia (n.d.) Melanoma: Your guide to best cancer care. Available at: www.cancer.org.au/cancercareguides/melanoma (Accessed: 5 October 2026). 4. Melanoma Institute Australia (2025) Melanoma facts. Available at: melanoma.org.au/about-melanoma/melanoma-facts/ (Accessed: 5 October 2026).*