

In the news

NOT AS SUNNY AS ADVERTISED

Several recent reports in the popular press have indicated that the benefits of exposure to sunlight might outweigh the risks of developing skin cancer.

At the recent International Investigative Dermatology Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland, UK, the results of a small study of 24 volunteers that had examined the effect of ultraviolet (UV) light on blood pressure were presented. Exposure of the participants for 20 minutes to UV light and heat from lamps or heat alone (UV light was 'blocked'), both resulted in a reduction in blood pressure. However, this effect was only prolonged (for up to an hour) after exposure to both heat and UV light, and this was linked to the generation of nitric oxide, which is a known vasodilator. Aside from missing the finer details, many press reports used the following quote "we suspect that the benefits to heart health of sunlight will outweigh the risk of skin cancer" from Dr Richard Weller, a senior lecturer in dermatology at Edinburgh University, UK, who was involved in the study, to write their headlines. (*BBC News*, 8 May 2013)

However, as Oliver Childs of Cancer Research UK pointed out, what was missing from the majority of the press reports was the fact that these data had not yet been peer reviewed and that the study had not examined anything related to skin cancer risk. (*Cancer Research UK Science Update blog*, 11 May 2013).

Indeed, although several of the reports went on to appropriately quote Weller as stating that "We now plan to look at the relative risks of heart disease and skin cancer in people who have received different amounts of sun exposure", the importance of the following quote "If this confirms that sunlight reduces the death rate from all causes, we will need to reconsider our advice on sun exposure", was apparent in only a few. (*The Telegraph*, 8 May 2013)

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