

Communicating UVR information to the public

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Abstract. The Ultraviolet Index (UVI), while a useful source of sun protection information, has some recognised failings as a communication tool. The Health Sponsorship Council (HSC) is working to improve the messaging, taking into account findings from audience research and media consultation.

NZ UVI – goals and strategy

In New Zealand, since the summer of 2003/04 the UVI has been publicised in the form of a graphic based on the shape of the “fire danger” alert, using colours and numbers consistent with the World Health Organization standards (refer Figure 1) and replaced the no longer endorsed ‘burn-time’ measure.

The goal of the UVI is to “accurately inform New Zealanders of the risk of UVR on a daily basis and the appropriate actions to mitigate those risks”.

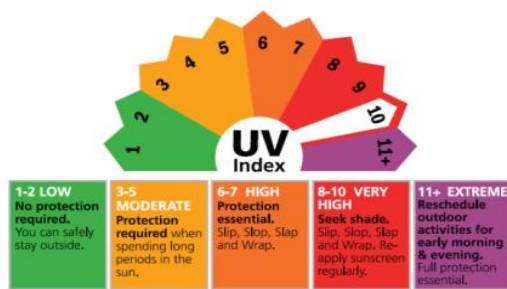


Figure 1: New Zealand Ultraviolet Index, 2003 - present

The HSC is the agency with primary responsibility for promoting the UVI. The HSC has been contracted by the Ministry of Health to deliver a health promotion programme (Sun Safety) that will contribute to a reduction in the proportion of New Zealanders who develop and die from skin cancer. The UVI is an important part of this strategy.

Two key audiences for the UVI are:

- The media that would be presenting the UVI in print, television, and radio.
- The general public who would use the information to protect themselves from harm from the sun. The information presented needs to be timely, relevant, and useful in their daily lives.

UVI communication strategy

HSC contracts the MetService to deliver the UVI to New Zealand media channels. MetService use data from The National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research (NIWA), which can then be incorporated into news and weather forecasts. Placement channels for the UVI include newspapers, online, on-site notices, text alerts, and television. Television weather forecasts constitute prime media “real estate” – they reach at least one-fifth of New Zealanders every night, are seen as credible sources, enable planning for the next day’s

activities, and are nominated by audience members as their most commonly accessed source of UVR information.

The HSC/ MetService contract eliminates the need for the media to pay for UVI information – this had previously been a key barrier to media uptake (along with concerns about space and perceived lack of demand by the audience for UVR information).

Media context – issues

By the summer of 2008/09, some national news media (TV One, TV3 and several daily newspapers) stopped broadcasting the UVI. Media groups reported problems with fitting the UVI into the broadcast formats; a perceived lack of interest and understanding due to the lack of change in the UVI over summer; and a lack of regionally-specific detail which made the information less relevant and difficult for audience members to apply to their own situation.

HSC research and development

In the years following the launch, research between 2003 and 2006 indicated some increasing awareness of the UVI, but also that it was not necessarily a call to action for those who had seen it. Qualitative research was commissioned in 2008 to build on these findings.

Findings from focus groups showed that, along with general low awareness, the main issues with the UVI were around interpretation. While the UVI was understood at a basic level (i.e. increasing risk), respondents were frequently confused by the detail, and over-laid personal interpretations (eg meaning of colours, relevance for own skin type, need to implement behavioural recommendations).

Additional quantitative research supported these findings.

Design issues identified

HSC collated summaries of all available New Zealand and international research with the public on the use and understanding of the UVI. Some of the key modifiable design issues that were identified consistently among studies were used to guide development of an alternative modified tool which would be considered for implementation. Recommended changes to particular elements of the UVI graphic included:

Colour: While the meaning of green (safe to go) and red (danger/stop) were easily understood, the other colours on the UVI produced confusion. The colour scheme needs to be simple and have clear action recommendations.

Scale/ numbers: The meaning of the numbers on the UVI is unclear, and can create confusion.

Timing/ seasonality: The UVI needs to be more clearly applicable to time of day and year, and incorporate the effects of cloud.

Research findings suggested that there was no “one size fits all” method of presenting UVR information – no one UVI design worked on every level for every person surveyed or for each media context.

Possible alternative – audience and media feedback

The HSC commissioned the development of a modified UVI to be considered for future media use. Key elements that were changed before testing included the colour scheme, communication of behavioural recommendations, communication of time, and the overall presentation (refer Figure 2).

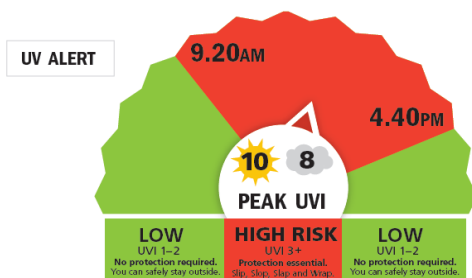


Figure 2: Proposed alternative tool for communicating UVR information, 2009

This alternative design was tested, along with the current UVI graphic, with a sample of 302 New Zealanders aged 25 – 54, recruited from an online consumer panel. Key findings included:

- Compared with the original design, respondents demonstrated a significantly higher out-take of recommended sun protection actions needed from the alternative design. A high level of understanding of the UVR risk at different times of day was also demonstrated from the alternative design.
- The time of day at which sun protective behaviour should be taken was rated as the most important of eight UVR messages (43% put it among the top 2 messages they needed from the UVI).
- Respondents had a strong preference for UVR messages to be daily (rather than seasonal) and regionally-specific.

The new design was also shown to media contacts, in meetings arranged by MetService with key personnel from Fairfax Media, APN, TV3 Weather and TVNZ News and Weather. The aim at this point was to solicit ideas and feedback rather than present fixed ideas or decisions.

Overall, there was support from media contacts for the direction taken with the modified version of the UVI.

- The presentation of simple, relevant (regional) information, with greater emphasis on when protection was needed, was supported.
- All media contacts supported the need for clear time indicators and ability to convey change over time (as opposed to the current model which is static, showing peak UVI for the day).
- The clear/ cloudy sky information was not well understood by all.

- Television media contacts felt that the modified version was graphically stronger but would still be incompatible with current weather presentation formats.
- It was acknowledged that the communicating of UVR information was not a case of “one size fits all” and the messaging will need to be designed according to the parameters imposed by the media channels as well as the way in which those channels are used by the public.

Although there is considerable work to do, all media contacts expressed will to support the ongoing improvement of both the design and placement of the UVR information.

Response going forward

The presentation of UVR information through media channels presents both opportunities and challenges. However, HSC regards the UVI as a valuable part of a wider communications strategy in skin cancer prevention.

HSC will continue to improve the tools used to communicate UVR information, to ensure that it is useful, relevant and enabling to the general public. We intend to continue to work with partners and colleagues and to develop ways compile, communicate and evaluate UVR information. Future iterations of the UVR communication strategy may incorporate graphic and text based formats, stronger relationships with media, scripted information in weather presentations, ongoing education of presenters, and increased promotion and placement in a variety of media channels.

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