

Bridging the gap between science and behaviour: the case of the Ultraviolet Index

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Abstract.

The Ultraviolet Index (UVI) is an international scientific measure of ultraviolet radiation in the environment. It is recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) as being the optimum tool for communicating skin cancer risk from sunlight and, as such, has been used extensively around the world since the early 1990s.

Until October 2003, 'burn-time', the estimated amount of time an individual could safely spend in the sun, had been widely used in New Zealand as an indicator of skin cancer risk. 'Burn-time's' apparent success as a communication tool meant that growing calls for its replacement with the UVI were met with considerable resistance. Not only were New Zealanders familiar with 'burn-time' and appeared to actually use it as a guide to sun protection, the media also liked it and were happy to include it in weather reports. The UVI, by comparison, was a complex concept, it gave no indication of appropriate behavioural responses to the risk, and the media (who would be relied on to communicate the UVI) did not like it. However, growing evidence of widespread misinterpretation of 'burn-time', increasing concern amongst the scientific community that 'burn-time' was conceptually flawed and calls for New Zealand practice to be brought into line with the WHO recommendations, could not be ignored.

In 2003 the Health Sponsorship Council and Cancer Society SunSmart partnership was given the difficult task of replacing 'burn-time' with the UVI. This presentation will describe the challenges involved in marketing a new public health concept to an audience for whom the old concept still retained a great deal of currency. It will detail the innovative way in which the scientifically accurate but complex UVI was refined so as to be appropriate for the New Zealand setting and so as to explicitly link information about ultraviolet radiation levels to practical sun protective behaviours. Finally, early indications of audience awareness, understanding and use of the UVI will be discussed.

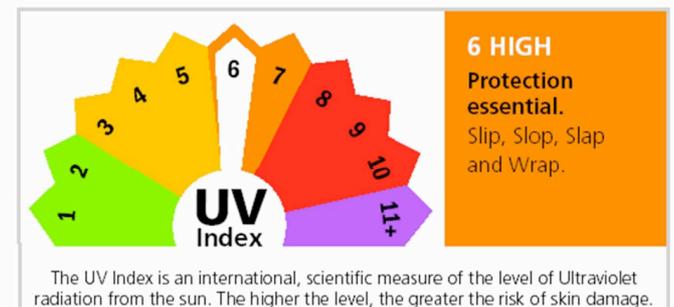
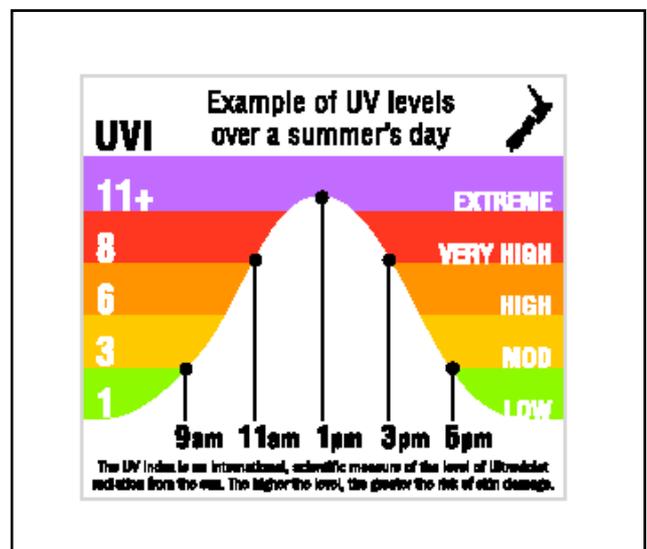


Fig. 1. UV Index as it appears in print, when level is at 6