Sunscreen Access and Skin Cancer Prevention: Availability at the Marine Corps Exchange

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PRACTICE **POINTS**

- Military service members face increased UV exposure from occupational and deployment conditions, but sunscreen use is limited by logistical, educational, and behavioral barriers.
- Sunscreen availability in military exchanges partially meets dermatologic guidelines, highlighting opportunities to expand tailored options and integrate sun protection into operational readiness policy.

Military service members are at high risk for skin cancer due to unique occupational and environmental exposures, particularly in the aviation community, in which high-altitude flying, prolonged outdoor aircraft maintenance, physical training, field exercises, and deployments limit access to shade and opportunities for sunscreen reapplication. During deployment or field operations, service members may operate in environments with limited access to SPF products, particularly if sunscreen is not included among personal items.

Research on sun protection strategies and skin cancer risk factors in military personnel is critical to improving prevention, particularly given the higher incidence of melanoma in this population. A 2010 retrospective tumor registry review from the Department of Defense and the National Cancer Institute found higher melanoma rates in military personnel compared with the general population among individuals aged 45 to 49 years (33.62 vs 27.49), 50 to 54 years (49.76 vs 32.18), and 55 to 59 years (178.48 vs 39.17).[1]

This article discusses barriers to sun protection in military populations, evaluates sunscreen availability in military exchanges, and considers implications for policy and prevention.

Barriers to Sun Protection and Sunscreen Use

According to Rosenberg et al,[2] the cause of higher rates of skin cancer among military service members may be multifactorial, including financial barriers to sunscreen use, limited education on photodamage, and insufficient emphasis on sun protection during demanding operational or training activities. Veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom who were surveyed about UV exposure and sunscreen indicated that 23% (49/211) received education about skin cancer but less than 30% (60/211) used sunscreen consistently during deployment due to lack of access, which has been reported previously.[3] Sunscreen adherence also may be reduced in this population due to factors such as skin irritation, cost, poor cosmetic acceptability, and lower utilization among male service members. In their literature review of 9 publications pertaining to skin cancer risk through December 2016, Riemenschneider et al[1] noted that male service members comprised 85% of the US military in 2014, and men statistically have lower rates of sunscreen use than women.

Sunscreen Availability and Product Analysis in Military Exchanges

Sunscreen is an important component of skin care for skin cancer prevention. More consistent use has been noted in households with annual incomes of $60,000 or higher.[4] Sunscreen product availability has not been evaluated in the military community. Exchange stores are military equivalents of commercial chain stores where service members can purchase tax-free items. The Marine Corps Exchange (MCX) operates on 18 large active-duty bases worldwide. Patrons include active-duty service members from any branch, veterans, and family members. Officials from the MCX headquarters approve and maintain items sold on base. Although product availability may vary by location, standardization is maintained through vendor agreements influenced by customer demand and includes both exchange-branded and private-label products.[5]

In a review of 96 sunscreen products at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point MCX, 62.5% (60/96) met American Academy of Dermatology guideline criteria (SPF ≥30,

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broad-spectrum UVA/UVB protection, and water resistance of 40-80 minutes).[6] Of all products, 79.1% (76/96) were SPF 30 or higher, 76.0% (73/96) were water-resistant, and all provided broad-spectrum protection. Lotion formulations comprised 62.5% (60/96), and the mean price per ounce was $11.96. Opportunities for product expansion include increased availability of options for sensitive skin, as mineral sunscreens comprised 14.6% (14/96) of products; greater variety of products marketed to men, which accounted for 5.2% (5/96); and improved representation for service members with skin of color, as tinted formulations comprised 2.1% (2/96).[6]

Implications for Policy and Operational Readiness

Given these data, future studies should evaluate sunscreen purchasing behaviors among US service members to determine MCX utilization and whether product selection is driven by active-duty demand or broader consumer purchasing patterns. If product offerings are driven by the civilian customer base, this may result in a lack of tailored options for military service members who are most at risk for high UV exposure. If the MCX does not meet the needs of service members adequately or is inaccessible due to cost or inventory limitations, it highlights a weakness in skin cancer prevention.

Future research should explore not only sunscreen purchasing behavior among service members but also barriers to access and compliance with sun protection measures, as these insights are critical for informing effective policy that balances personal responsibility with institutional support. This could help with advocacy efforts for more effective, readily available options on base. It also could strengthen the argument for alternative strategies to complement sunscreen use, such as a sunscreen allowance, inclusion of sunscreen with provided uniforms and equipment, patient education, work breaks, sun-protective uniform items, and designated shade areas at work.[6]

Final Thoughts

Policy changes such as routine provision of sunscreen through supply chains, issuing sunscreen with uniforms, or providing a sunscreen stipend could remove financial and logistical barriers to consistent use of sunscreen in military populations. These measures could be impactful during field operations, deployments, and training in austere environments, where commercial purchasing options are limited and UV exposure is high. A proactive approach to sun safety could demonstrate a commitment to preserving the current health and operational readiness of active-duty service members while reducing future financial burdens of skin disease and helping promote wellness in this population during retirement. As with ear protection, uniforms, and eyewear, sunscreen should be considered a standard component of operational readiness.

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