

Sunburn 'could be as bad as asbestos'

By Caroline Muspratt

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Sunburn could become the "new asbestos" and the biggest insurance threat to the building industry, experts claimed yesterday.

Skin cancer caused by long-term exposure to the sun could generate huge employers' liability claims, insurance broker Aon said. It said the risk could become as important an issue as asbestos, where claims are on course to cost in the region of £20bn over the next few decades.

Nigel Geary, team leader at Aon Construction Direct, said: "As temperatures soar this summer, builders need to think realistically about protecting their employees from the potential cancerous effects of working out in the sun all day.

"By including sun protection in your health and safety policy, you will be able to more effectively defend a claim if a former employee tries to prove negligence on your part for their illness."

Employers are legally responsible for the health and safety of their staff at work and an employee could potentially claim negligence against their boss years after the job has ended, Aon said.

Mr Geary said: "If they do develop cancer there's every chance it would come back to the employer years down the line."

He said it was "difficult to hazard a guess as to what might be the potential cost" and said it could be tough to prove that the employer was solely responsible for staff being exposed to the sun.

Last month the House of Lords ruled that where a worker was exposed to asbestos dust by several employers, he would have to seek a proportionate share of compensation from each. Previously, victims had been able to claim full recompense from one of several employers without having to prove which had caused the fatal exposure. Aon said: "This could have a knock-on effect for how sunburn claims are dealt with, leaving even more building companies at risk."

There are more than 70,000 new cases of skin cancer each year in the UK, according to Cancer Research.

Last year the European Parliament ruled that national governments must decide for themselves whether businesses would be required to ensure their workers cover up and use sunscreen.

It had proposed an EU directive to force bosses to make daily risk assessments about the strength of the sun, but MEPs came under pressure from business groups and voted to leave the decision to individual states.

Sunglasses group Silhouette said yesterday that spending five or more hours outside every day in the summer could increase a young person's risk of age-related macular degeneration - a disease that destroys sharp vision - by as much as 50pc. It said sunglasses were "a health necessity" rather than a fashion accessory.

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