Poster ID - **P1019**

Understanding Generational Differences in Sun Safety: A National Survey Analysis of Behaviors and Knowledge

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Background and Methods

Background

- Public engagement in sun-safe behaviors remain inconsistent despite established scientific consensus on the risks of sun exposure. Prior research demonstrates that sun protection knowledge, risk perception, and behaviors vary by demographic factors, including age.[1-3]
- Understanding generational differences may help dermatologists tailor counseling strategies to improve their patients' adherence to proper photoprotection.
- This study provides an assessment of the current state of sun protection perceptions and behaviors via a national survey.

Methods

- A cross-sectional national survey comprised of 5118 respondents residing within the United States was conducted in December 2024.
- Behavioral practices and perceptions were compared across generations defined as: Gen Z: aged 13–24, Millennial: aged 25–39, Gen X: aged 40–54, Boomers: aged 55+ years old and income groups: <$50k, $50–100k, >$100k using subgroup testing (95% CI).
  - These age and income cutoffs were chosen to maximize sample size across age and income groups.

Sun Protection Habits Were More Frequently Utilized in Recreational Settings than Daily Life

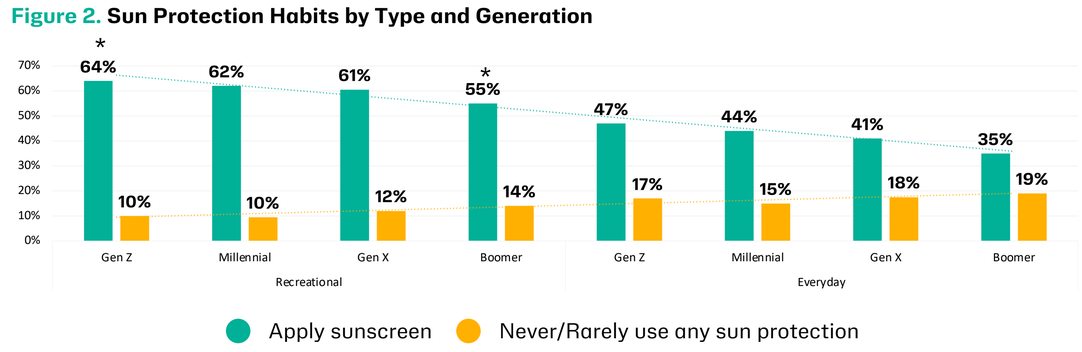
Figure 1. Sun Protection Habits by Activity+ (All Respondents)

	Recreational		Everyday	
Sun Protection Habits (any method)	Pool or beach activities	On vacation	Exercising outdoors	Running errands
Never	**6.3%***	**7.1%***	**8.5%***	**17.4%***
Rarely	9.6%	11.1%	12.9%	19.1%
Sometimes	19.7%	22.0%	23.0%	23.3%
Usually	23.6%*	24.7%*	21.7%	15.6%*
Always	30.3%*	22.8%*	18.1%*	12.0%*
Does not apply**	10.6%	12.3%	15.8%	12.7%

*Darker colors signify highest values. Percentages in bold signify statistical significance (p<0.05)
**Does not apply signifies does not engage in activity described

- Sun protection habits were primarily driven by recreational activities versus daily routines (**Figure 1**).
- However, only 22.8–30.3% of respondents reported *always/usually* engaging in sun protection habits during recreational activities with high sun exposure (when at the beach/pool or on vacation) (**Figure 1**).

Figure 2. Sun Protection Habits by Type and Generation



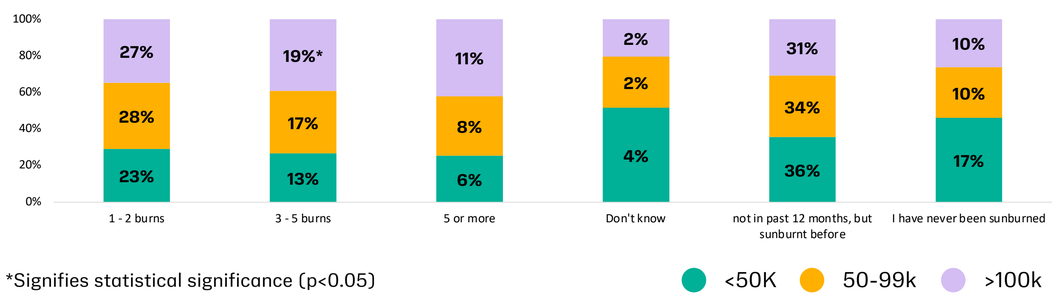
- Sunscreen was the most commonly used and preferred method of sun protection. Across all generations, sun protection behaviors were significantly higher during recreational activities, but dropped significantly in everyday situations. **(Figure 2).**
- Not using sun protection was more evident in everyday scenarios for all generations. Older generations were significantly more likely to forgo sun protection compared to younger generations (p<0.05).
- Despite this, Boomers were significantly more likely to report no sunburns for the past year (65%, vs 23 – 26% (Gen Z and Millennials), p<0.05).

Discussion

- Differences in actual sun protection behaviors were evident for all groups in recreational versus everyday use settings but were more pronounced among Boomers.
- The data suggests that risk perception nor concern alone does not uniformly drive consistent protection behaviors practices across age groups

Sunburn Incidence was Highest Among Higher Income Respondents, Despite More Widespread Use of Sun Protection Methods

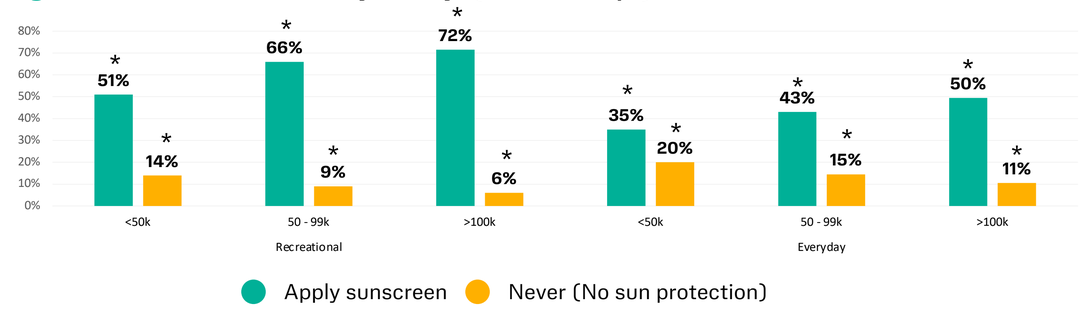
Figure 3. Sunburn Incidence in Past 12 Months by Income Group



*Signifies statistical significance (p<0.05)

- Sun protection habits were more evidently practiced in recreational settings for all income groups, though lower income groups were significantly less likely to engage in sun protection (p<0.05). Sunscreen was the most utilized form of sun protection for all income groups (**Figure 4**)

Figure 4. Sun Protection Habits by Activity+ (Income Groups)



- Higher income was associated with greater use of sun protection methods in both everyday and recreational settings, yet this group were significantly more likely to report getting sunburned (p<0.05, **Figure 3**).
- Lower income respondents (<$50k) were significantly more likely to use no sun protection compared with higher-income groups ($50–$99k and $100k+; p<0.05, **Figure 4**), and were more likely to report no sunburns or uncertainty about sunburn status (p<0.05), **Figure 3**).
- Regular visits to dermatologist was significantly lowest with the <$50k income group (9% vs 12% $50-$100k and 24% $100k+, p<0.05) *(Data not shown)*

*Signifies statistical significance (p<0.05). Percentages reflects T2B Always/Usually responses, except for 'Never' information
+ Recreational situations include "Spending a day at the beach' or 'Going outside for an extended period of time in the sun". Everyday situations include "Going outside for an extended period on a cloudy day" or "Going outside for a short period of time (<30 minutes)

Discussion

Higher-income respondents reported broader use of photoprotection strategies yet experienced the highest sunburn incidence. This pattern suggests that differences in UV-exposure contexts, engagement in recreational outdoor activities, behavioral consistency (e.g., reapplication), or potentially variations in sunburn recognition or reporting may explain observed disparities and differences in engagement in sun protection behaviors.

Conclusions

Overall Insights

- Findings from all groups showed inconsistencies in sun protection behaviors, signifying lower perceived susceptibility which was more evident in everyday scenarios. A paradox in reduced protective behavior and the corresponding clinical outcome (sunburn) was observed, with some higher risk (eg. Low income) groups reporting less sunburn despite less adoption of sun protective behaviors.
- The paradox in the reported incidence of sunburn for at-risk groups suggests that factors such as lower risk perception, inconsistent behavior, or gaps in sunburn recognition may play a role in consistent adoption of sun protection methods.
- At-risk groups may benefit from education to address misperceptions around incidental UV exposure (everyday use) and recognition of sunburn

Future Considerations

Future research can investigate underlying drivers that influence behavior and responses such as potential under-recognition of sunburn, barriers to sun protection, and differences in skin health literacy among groups, that may influence consistent adoption of protective habits.

References

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Disclosures: *This work was sponsored by Kenvue Brands LLC*

Author Disclosures: *Joyce Rhoden, Kassidy Hubert, Toni Anne Lisante, and Asha Patel Shah were employees of Kenvue Brands LLC at the time of the research. Guia Sylianteng was a contractor of ClinChoice Inc providing services to Kenvue Brands LLC at the time of the research.*

This data was already presented at the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD), March 27–31, 2026, Denver, CO, USA
European Academy of Dermatology and Venerology (EADV), September 30– October 3, 2026, Vienna, Austria