

# TAL SpotChecker Australian Skin Safety Report 2021

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# An introduction from Dr Priya Chagan

TAL General Manager, Health Services



As a specialist life insurer with an industry leading focus on health, we've seen first-hand the positive effects that prevention and early detection can have on managing health, and we want to do everything in our power to spread that message.

COVID-19 has meant that for too many Australians, skin health has not been prioritised. In presenting this report, we are aiming to engage Australia with a renewed message around protection and prevention, to capture the public's attention, drive attitudinal change, and most importantly, change behaviours when it comes to skin safety.

We hope this report helps to empower you with greater understanding around the value of preventative health.



**Dr Priya Chagan**  
TAL General Manager, Health Services

This year marks the second edition of the TAL SpotChecker Australian Skin Safety Report and the sixth year of TAL's national skin safety awareness initiative, **TAL SpotChecker.**

Since the launch of the program in 2016, TAL SpotChecker has established leadership as a protector of skin health. Whilst the pandemic has again this year restricted us from providing our free professional skin checks at beaches around Australia, we remain as committed as ever to building awareness around the importance of skin safety through a range of other channels.

# Skin cancer in our country



**2 in 3**

Research from the [Cancer Council of Australia](#) shows that **2 in 3 Australians will be diagnosed with some form of skin cancer by the age of 70**

**32%**

**Less than a third of Australians are aware that 2 in 3 Australians will be diagnosed with skin cancer**

Australians love the outdoors and beaches are a second home to many during the summer months. However, this pursuit is not without risk and there is an awareness and apathy gap to bridge.

Whilst everyone should be adopting sun safety practices when heading outdoors, around one third of Australians (28%) are fairly relaxed about taking measures to self-protect and one quarter rarely or never apply sunscreen when outside.



# A steady progress in skin safety behaviours

## Self-checking needs to become a priority again. But how often is enough?

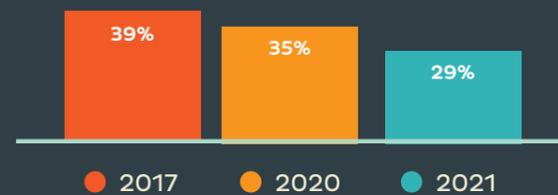
Thirty percent of Australians said they have not prioritised their skin health this year because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Personal responsibility is an important factor, and in the early stages of skin cancer development, you have the best chance of noticing changes, so self-checking is a simple but powerful way to look after yourself and could save your life.

The **Cancer Council of Australia** recommends adults check their own skin and moles every three months. According to TAL research, the number of people who self-check their skin every 2-3 months decreased from 16% in 2018, to 10% in 2019, then up to 13% in 2020, and again slightly up to 14% in 2021. With the last 18 months characterised by the global pandemic, regular self-checks have not been top of mind for many, however the message is clear – more frequent self-checking is an essential part of reducing the incidence and impact of skin cancer.

## 19% of Australians don't examine their skin for signs of skin cancer



## 29% of Australians have never had a professional skin check



## More people are getting professional skin checks

Whilst self-checking has seen a general decline, TAL's annual research has revealed a steady increase in the number of Australians getting professional skin checks. Our data traces back to 2017 where 39% of Australians admitted they had never had a professional skin check, which reduced to 35% in 2020, and down again to 29% in 2021.

Living in Australia, a country with one of the highest rates of skin cancer in the world, it is important that in addition to self-checking, people look to professionals to examine their skin thoroughly, as specialists have a number of tools and techniques to see beyond what the naked eye can pick up.

But not everyone knows where to go. Our research has shown a decline in the understanding of where to get a skin check, with 80% of Australians in 2019 saying they know where to get one, compared to 74% in 2020, and 72% in 2021. Visit the **TAL SpotChecker** website to book a skin check at your local GP.

## Increasing awareness of skin cancer is a step in the right direction

Our research has shown some promising signs that awareness of skin cancer prevalence in Australia is growing, with only 12% of Australians correctly estimating in 2019 that 2 in 3 will be diagnosed with skin cancer by age 70, versus 14% in 2020, and 22% in 2021.

However, more than half of Australians (59%) still acknowledge that they underestimate the prevalence of skin cancer in Australia, so it's clear that there's still more to do to support people in talking about and committing to skin safety.

Secondary prevention in the form of regular self-checks and professional skin checks is the only way to ensure early detection. Inertia among many Australians when it comes to important preventative screening tests could mean people are placing themselves at increased risk.



# State of the nation

Where we live in Australia has been of particular significance this past year, and this has been shown to influence our perceived susceptibility and concerns about skin cancer.

According to the **Australian Institute of Health and Welfare**, those in Queensland face the highest risk of developing melanoma, followed by Western Australia, New South Wales, Tasmania, Australian Capital Territory, Victoria, South Australia, and lastly, Northern Territory.

This flows through to risk awareness levels, with 82% of Queenslanders telling us their location makes them more at risk of developing skin cancer, and 66% of West Australians saying the same, compared with 45% of Victorians and 41% of South Australians.

72% of Australians believe people living in states with more annual days of sun should look after their skin safety more



When we asked Australians if they thought people living in states that have more annual days of sun should look after their skin safety more, nearly 4 in 5 (79%) told us they should.

Yet while West Australians are 8% more likely than the average Australian to wear protective clothing when spending time outdoors, 21% never self-check their skin for signs of skin cancer, compared to a national average of 19%.

Also, nearly a third of those from Queensland (29%) and Western Australia (30%) said they are fairly relaxed about taking measures to protect themselves from skin cancer.

**60%** of Australians feel they should be getting professional skin checks more often

**67%** of Australians feel they should be self-checking their skin more often

While people living in states that receive minimal annual sunshine may consider they are not as exposed, they can still receive enough UV radiation to risk developing skin cancer.

We hear a lot about being sun smart and skin safe in the midst of summer, especially in states with a beach culture, but in reality, this is a year-round proposition. Sunscreen should be applied 20 minutes before going outdoors for optimal protection. If you are in the sun for long periods, then it needs to be reapplied every two hours.

Vigilance around skin cancer checks and sun safety prevention measures should be a priority for all Australians, regardless of the state you live in and the annual days of sun.

14% of Australians never reapply sunscreen when spending long periods of time outside

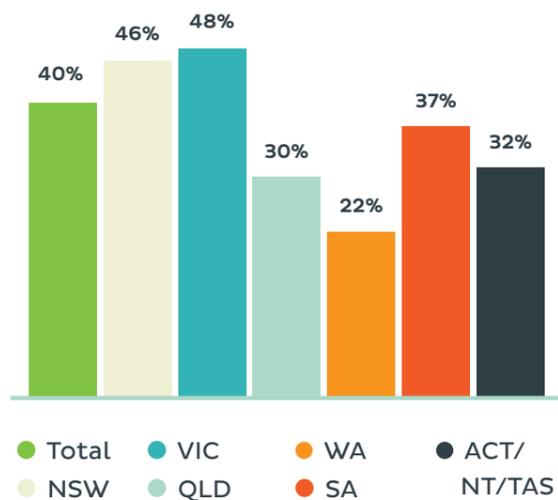


# Living in a COVID-19 changed world

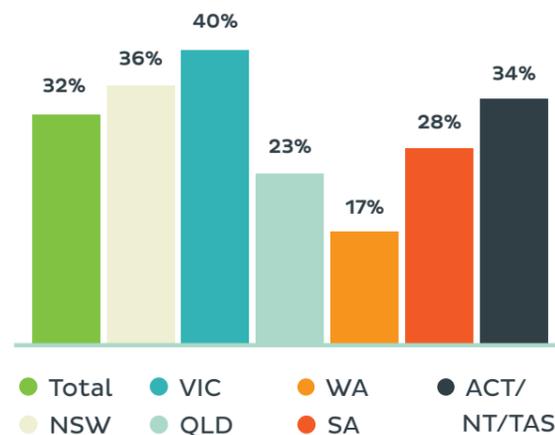
While restrictions related to COVID-19 differed across Australia over the last 18 months, it is clear from our research that the pandemic has had an impact on Australians' overall skin protection behaviour.

The research suggests that states which faced greater COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, in particular New South Wales and Victoria, were more distracted from their usual self-checking practices and also delayed visiting the GP this year because of the pandemic.

## 40% of Australians delayed visiting their GP due to the COVID-19 pandemic



## 32% of Australians said the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected their usual skin check practices



## 1 in 4

1 in 4 (24%) Australians said the COVID-19 pandemic had distracted them from regularly self-checking their skin

## 1 in 5

1 in 5 (20%) Australians said a reason for them not getting a professional skin check was to avoid unnecessary trips to the doctor due to COVID-19

## NSW

People from New South Wales are **11% less likely** than the average Australian to feel that where they live makes them more susceptible to skin cancer

People from New South Wales are **7% less likely** compared to the average Australian to always or frequently wear sunscreen when spending time outdoors



**Kathy Martin, 62**  
New South Wales

“ In 2018, I was diagnosed with high stage 3 low grade 4 melanoma. I would've never known if it wasn't for my husband. He noticed an unusual mole on my back which was causing him concern. I booked an appointment with my doctor immediately and thank goodness I did.

When I got the call from the doctor saying the pathology report was melanoma, it was so jarring and surreal. I underwent surgery that day to remove the mole and surrounding skin.

Although it was high grade melanoma, I feel lucky that I caught it relatively early, and it didn't spread to other parts of my body.

I'm such an advocate for self-checking in addition to professional skin checks. ”

## VIC



**Jo Gniel, 50**  
Victoria

“ I practically lived at the local swimming pool as a kid, and I can't tell you how many times I was burned and had blisters as a child from spending time in the sun. Being a child of the 70s, there was no such thing as sunscreen.

In 2020, I underwent two surgeries for the removal of Basal Cell Carcinomas (BCCs) and then topical chemotherapy later in the year to reduce the risk of re-occurrence. In total, I have had six skin lesions (BCCs and SCCs). I now see my dermatologist every six months for a skin check.

You think it won't happen to you, but it can. I now make sure I'm aware of what's going on with my face and arms and get any noticeable changes on my skin checked out as soon as they appear. ”

Victorians are **11% more likely** than the average Australian to admit they should be getting professional skin checks more often

Victorians are **16% less likely** than the average Australian to feel that where they live makes them more susceptible to skin cancer

# WA

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West Australians are **20% more likely** than the average Australian to say that where they live makes them more susceptible to skin cancer

West Australians are **8% more likely** than the average Australian to always or frequently wear protective clothing when spending time outdoors

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**Rachael Dawe, 28**  
Western Australia

“ I grew up in Western Australia where I spent my weekends surfing. I practically lived at the beach as a teen and started surf teaching and competing in surf competitions abroad from an early age.

When I turned 26, I attended my first skin check where three moles found on my back were biopsied. A week later I returned to the clinic to be informed one mole was in fact an in situ melanoma that needed wide margin removal immediately.

As a young Australian woman who loves the great outdoors, this shocking experience then prompted me to return for skin checks every six months and always carry sunscreen in my purse and wear sunscreen under makeup every day of the year. ”

# SA

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**Alison Othen, 59**  
South Australia

“ Growing up, I spent a lot of time at my family's poultry farm playing in the sun and was very aware of the impacts of sun damage as both my parents had skin cancers removed.

I had my first experience with skin cancer in my early 20s where I had a Basal Cell Carcinoma (BCC) removed from above my eyebrow which left me with a t-shaped scar. A few years later in my 30s, I had three more BCCs removed from my stomach and leg with countless more burnt off my face, neck, and back.

Now in my 50s, I've recently had a squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) removed from the corner of my eye leaving me needing a skin graft where the growth was removed. I now make a conscious effort to self-check my skin for even the slightest changes in appearance. ”

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**1 in 4 (26%) South Australians have never had a professional skin check, slightly below the 29% national average**

**South Australians are 25% less likely than the average Australian to feel that where they live makes them more susceptible to skin cancer**

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# QLD

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Queenslanders are **49% more likely** than the average Australian to feel that where they live makes them more susceptible to skin cancer

Queenslanders are **11% more likely** than the average Australian to always or frequently seek shade when spending time outdoors

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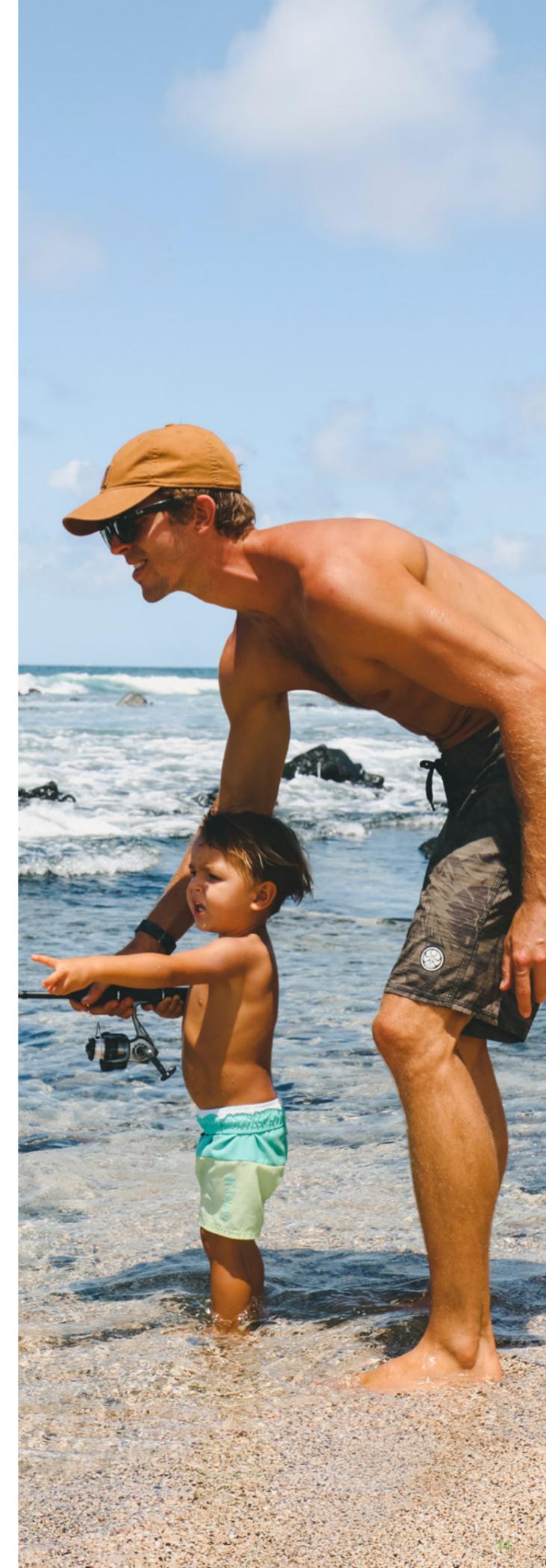
**Courtney Mangan, 35**  
Queensland

“ In 2017, my dad pointed out an unusual skin complexion on my arm. I'd also been experiencing a persistent itch and noticed a mole on my shoulder that started to change colour and became scab-like.

I was diagnosed with melanoma. Two weeks later, I underwent surgery to remove the mole and a lymph node.

Two and a half years later, I spotted another unusual lump and my specialist diagnosed me with stage 3b melanoma and I needed immediate surgery, and then immunotherapy cancer treatment.

In May 2021, I discovered the melanoma had spread to my bowel and lymph nodes. Three months later after a follow up scan the melanoma had spread to my thigh. I currently have stage 4 cancer and am undergoing a more toxic immunotherapy in hopes to reduce and stop the spread. ”



# We're all one under the sun

When understanding Australians' attitudes and habits in relation to skin safety, location and lifestyle influences can impact behaviors and motivations to act.

Looking at a state like Victoria, which receives the least amount of distributed sunshine relative to other Australian states, according to the **Bureau of Meteorology**, the research finds 68% of residents agree they should be self-checking their skin more, while 1 in 5 (19%) never self-check their skin.

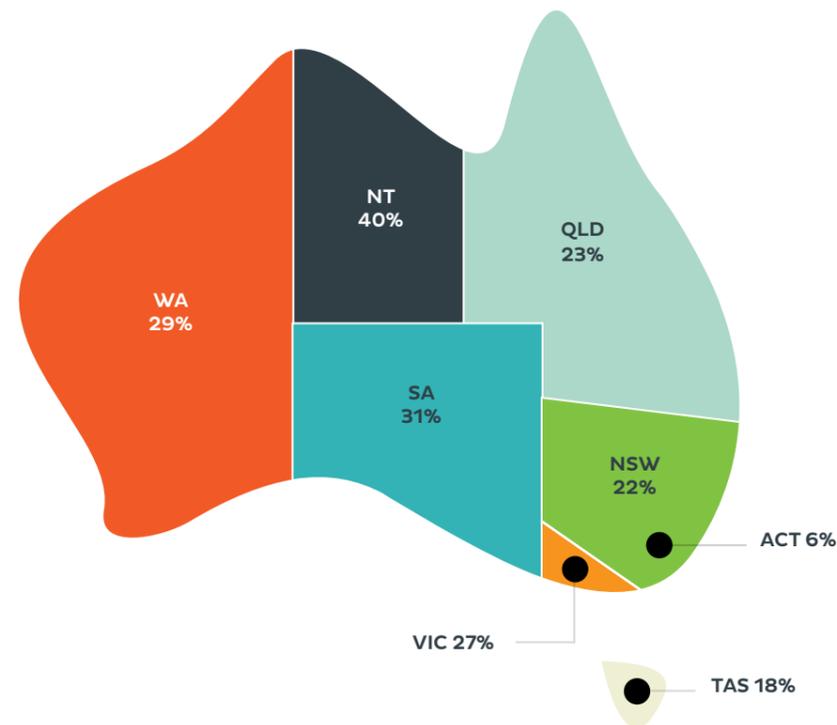
On the other end of the spectrum, Western Australians, who receive the most annual sunshine every year of any Australian state, are the most concerned about skin checks and self-checking their skin, and they are 8% more likely than the average Australian to self-check at least every 2 – 3 months.

Overall, there's still a lot of work to do in raising levels of awareness and education across the country around skin safety measures.



# Looking at our country

**Percentage of Australians who have had a professional skin check in the past 12 months**



# The journey continues

More than 13,000 people are diagnosed with melanoma in Australia every year, and almost 980,000 new cases of Basal Cell Carcinomas (BCC) and Squamous Cell Carcinomas (SCC) are treated annually in our country, according to the **Cancer Council of Australia**.

The more aware Australians are about the importance of skin health and regular self-checks and professional skin checks, the more confident they can feel about their time in the sun.

Only a very small number of Australians (8%) currently rank their attentiveness to skin safety as excellent and just 2 in 5 (39%) believe they do enough to protect themselves from skin cancer.

Our insights over the last six years do show a slight uptick in people self-checking their skin for signs of skin cancer and getting professional skin checks, but with COVID-19 disrupting a number of preventative health practices this year, we need to get back on track as a country.

With Australians at such high risk, TAL is committed to spreading the word about sun safety and skin protection in Australia, through the TAL SpotChecker and other programs, so that all Australians can carry on living the life they love with safety and peace of mind.

## Contact us



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The statistical information in this document comes from surveys that were conducted by Edentify Pty Ltd on behalf of the TAL Group in 2021 with a nationally representative sample of 1,500 respondents in Australia aged 18–65+ years old, and a surveys conducted by Pureprofile Pty Ltd on behalf of the TAL Group, between 2017–2020, with a nationally representative sample of 1,000+ respondents in Australia aged 18–65+ years old.

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