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Commentary

Ultraviolet risk in elite sport requires policy integration: implications for the 2026 World Cup

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ABSTRACT

Ultraviolet radiation is a well-established cause of photoaging and malignancy, yet sun protection remains absent from elite sport even as FIFA adds cooling breaks and physicians publicly push for stronger heat protocols ahead of the 2026 World Cup. Roughly 1,200 athletes, plus coaches and officials, will play summer matches across high-UV regions. Predicted mean UV indices were calculated across all 2026 host cities using NASA satellite data, with values ranging from 6-10 (high to extreme risk). FIFA's medical regulations address heat exposure but not UV. Feasible, low-cost fixes—standardized sunscreen provision, reapplication education, UV-informed scheduling—could close this gap using infrastructure FIFA already has. The World Cup offers dermatology a rare, high-visibility platform to model occupational sun-safety policy.

Keywords: Ultraviolet radiation, FIFA, 2026 world cup

INTRODUCTION

In preparation for the 2026 World Cup this summer, FIFA a announced the addition of cooling breaks to all matches, reflecting growing recognition of environmental risks in elite sport. This concern has been expanded upon by physicians and public health practitioners who have called on FIFA to enact stronger heat mitigation protocols in an open letter published in May 2026.[1] This letter brings an interdisciplinary panel together around a foreseeable and preventable risk: climate and player welfare. Notably, though, cutaneous protection received no mention. While heat mitigation is being formalized by FIFA and studied by external policy advocates, solar radiation an equally important environmental hazard remains largely unaddressed.[2] Ultraviolet radiation, a well-established risk factor for dermatologic disease, in professional athletics lack photoprotective policies despite evidence of exposure to UV levels exceeding recommended limits.[3] With the expansion of the 2026 games, occupational sun exposure will increase; approximately 1,200 athletes alongside coaches and officials are expected to participate. Matches are frequently scheduled midday, during summer months, and in regions with high UV indices, creating a predictable, large-scale, repeated exposure setting.[4] A review of publicly available FIFA medical and competition regulations demonstrates clear guidance on heat mitigation, yet comparable photoprotection policy is notably absent despite dermatologic risk.[5,6] While occupational dermatology has traditionally focused on agriculture and industry, sport represents a comparable source of sustained UV exposure. Integration of preventive policies into events including the World Cup, with viewership in the billions, could improve athlete safety while influencing broader public awareness.

How should governing bodies integrate photoprotective policies? Scalable mitigation strategies may include UV-

informed match scheduling, standardized sunscreen provisions and education on reapplication intervals.[7]

These measures are feasible within FIFA's existing infrastructure; for example, wet-bulb globe temperature monitoring already used to assess heat stress during matches monitors solar radiation and could be extended to inform UV mitigation. In addition to FIFA's existing weather monitoring systems, other tools that measure UV data could be utilized. Using NASA satellite data, the mean UV index values across host cities for the projected tournament window were calculated (June-July) based on data from 2025.[8] Results demonstrate all tournament locations have projected UV indices between 6-10 (Figure 1).

UVI	Tournament locations	Interpretation
10	Guadalajara, Mexico City, Monterrey	Extreme
9	Atlanta, Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Miami	Very high
8	Kansas City	Very high
7	Seattle, Toronto	High
6	Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, Vancouver	High

Data source: NASA Giovanni · OMI OMUVBd v003 · June 1 – July 31, 2025 average

Figure 1: 2026 FIFA world cup tournament locations sorted by UV index.

These findings could be used to inform scheduling of matches. Match locations in Mexico are projected to face extreme UV exposure (UVI 10) and cities across Canada and the United States could see UV exposure classified as high to very high (UVI 6-9). While making changes for the upcoming world cup is improbable, data collection and interpretation during the 2026 games could be used for future tournaments. Elite football tournaments can provide a global platform to model UV protection policy. Integration of photoprotection into major sporting events represents a practical opportunity for dermatologic leadership in occupational health and disease prevention on a global scale.

CONCLUSION

While heat mitigation has taken center stage in the lead-up to the 2026 World Cup, photoprotection deserves equal attention. Tournaments of this scale offer dermatologists and public health officials a practical platform to advance UV protection policy. As play unfolds, FIFA and local health officials have an opportunity to build a framework — UV-informed scheduling, sunscreen provision, and reapplication education — that addresses solar radiation with the same rigor as heat.

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