UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

Skin Cancer

Skin cancer is the most common of all types of cancer. About one million Americans develop skin cancer yearly. Skin cancer is not just a disease of older people. One quarter of the people who develop melanoma each year are 39 years old or younger.

Skin cancer is treatable and usually curable if it is diagnosed early, but even more importantly, many types of skin cancer can be prevented simply by avoiding sun AND sun lamp exposure!

What causes skin cancer?

Many skin cancers are caused by exposure to UV (ultraviolet) radiation. UV radiation is found in sunlight and in the light from tanning lamps. *Some tanning salons might claim that "indoor" tanning is safe, but that is not the case*. Exposure to UV radiation, either from the sun or from tanning lamps, causes damage to the cells of your skin. The damage is cumulative over a lifetime, meaning that the damage you got from that bad sunburn when you were six years old is still lingering. The more times you are exposed to the sun (or tanning lamps), the more damage occurs. Eventually, this can lead to skin cancer.

Most people would agree that a sunburn damages your skin. Many people are not aware that a suntan also damages your skin - only it doesn't cause pain. There is no such thing as a safe tan. And, having a tan might protect you from getting a bad sunburn, but it does not protect you from developing skin cancer. In fact, *tanning adds to your cumulative skin damage and increases your risk of skin cancer*.

Keep in mind that once someone develops a skin cancer, even if it is treated and cured, they are at increased risk of developing other skin cancers.

What are the different kinds of skin cancer?

The three most common types of skin cancer are *basal cell cancer*, *squamous cell cancer* (these two are non-melanoma skin cancers), and *melanoma*.

Basal cell skin cancer is the most common, but also the most curable if diagnosed promptly. It is usually a smooth nodule or bump with a "pearly" appearance. It may have tiny blood vessels around the edges and it may have a central ulcer or scab.

Squamous cell skin cancer is often curable in its early stages, but it can be deadly if not treated. This usually has a crusty or dry appearance and often will bleed or have a central scab.

Melanoma is the least common but most dangerous of the three as it is responsible for three-quarters of the nearly 10,000 skin cancer deaths per year. It is usually dark like a mole but has distinguishing characteristics (see A, B, C, D below.)

How is skin cancer prevented?

The easy answer - Avoid the sun and sunlamp exposure!

Wear protective clothing when you are in the sun. Long sleeved shirts, hats, etc.. Loosely knit fabrics provide less protection than tightly knit fabrics.

Use sunscreen with a SPF of at least 15. Most sunscreen protects your skin from UVB (There are two types of UV radiation - UVA and UVB. UVB causes sunburn. Both types of UV radiation are associated with an increased risk of skin cancer.) Wearing sunscreen might allow you to spend more time in the sun because it protects you from burning, thus increasing your exposure time to UVA -remember, there is no safe UV radiation. (Look for ingredients in sunscreens that help screen UVA: benzophenone, oxybenzone, sulisonbezone, titanium dioxide, zinc oxide, and butyl methoxydibenzoylmethane, also known as avobenzone and Parsol 1789.)

The SPF (Sun Protection Factor) number tells you how much longer you can stay in the sun before burning. A SPF of 4 would allow you to stay in the sun four times longer than usual before burning. If a SPF of 4 gives you one hour in the sun, you can not apply more of the same sunscreen at the end of that hour and stay in the sun longer. Once your time is up, it's up!

Check the UV Index of your town. Many weather reports now list the UV Index for cities each day. The index is a scale from 1 to 10 with 10 being very high UV exposure. The UV Index is higher on sunny days. It also increases at higher altitudes. Even on cloudy days, some UV radiation reaches the earth. Don't assume that sunscreen isn't necessary on cloudy days.

Some research suggests that a diet low in fat might also decrease your risk of skin cancer.

What should I look for?

Any time something changes on your skin such as a new bump or scaly area, a sore that won't heal and especially if a mole changes color, size or shape, or if it bleeds or itches you should make an appointment with your health care provider.

Know the A B C D's of melanoma:

Asymmetry - one half of the mole looks different from the other half.

Border irregularity - edges are irregular, notched or indistinct.

Color - the color is not uniform, the mole looks mottled; it may have darker and lighter areas or areas of blue or red.

Diameter greater than 6 millimeters (the size of a pencil eraser or about 1/4 inch). Any sudden or continuing increase in size should also prompt evaluation.

Bottom line

Avoid the sun and sun lamps.
Wear hats and protective clothing and sunscreen.
See your health care provider promptly for any suspicious moles or changes on your skin.

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