

Protecting yourself from skin cancer

- Seek the shade, especially between 10 A.M. and 4 P.M.
- Don't let yourself get burned.
- Use a sunscreen with an SPF of 15 or higher every day.
- Apply 1 ounce (2 tablespoons) of sunscreen to your entire body 30 minutes before going outside. Reapply every two hours.
- Cover up with clothing, including a broad-brimmed hat and UV-blocking sunglasses.
- Keep newborns out of the sun. Sunscreen should be used on babies over the age of six months.
- Examine your skin head-to-toe every month.
- See your doctor every year for a professional skin exam.
- Avoid tanning and any kind of UV tanning salons.

Year-round sun protection is important!

- The sun's harmful ultraviolet (UV) radiation can penetrate many types of clothes
- The sun's UV rays also go through automobile and residential windows
- UV rays can damage your eyes, contributing to cataracts, macular degeneration, and even eyelid cancers
- When you're on snow or ice, your face and eyes are at almost twice the risk of UV damage because of reflected glare

Your Health

Understanding the risks of skin cancer

By Kristy Ann Pike

Mary Cowlisshaw has seen cancer before. As an oncology-certified clinical research nurse at Dixie Regional Medical Center and leader of the hospital's cancer support group, she has spent time with patients who are dealing with the disease.



She never dreamed she would spot her own cancer, or that she'd be the one sharing during support group.

But when a dime-sized dark patch showed up on her shoulder last summer, Cowlisshaw had a pretty good idea of what she was looking at.

"I thought that looks like melanoma." She set up an appointment with dermatologist Robin Berger (also a cancer survivor), and Dr. Berger confirmed Cowlisshaw's suspicions: she had a melanoma, a skin cancer.

While it isn't the only form of skin cancer, melanoma is the most serious form. If it is diagnosed and removed early, it is almost 100% curable, but if the cancer advances and metastasizes (spreads) to other parts of the body, it is hard to treat and can be deadly. According to the Skin Cancer Foundation, the number of cases of melanoma diagnosed in the past 10 years has increased more rapidly than cases of any other cancer. "Over 51,000 new cases are reported to the American Cancer Society each year, and it is probable that a great many more occur and are not reported," Cowlisshaw says.

Dr. Berger sees a number of such cases every year. She encourages her patients to wear sunscreen every day. "Every skier knows you can burn through the clouds. It's a good idea to apply sunscreen every morning before you leave the house. If you have children, it's your responsibility to protect them as well. Make it part of their morning routine, and let them see that it is part of yours as well. As they get older, the thing that will make them most likely to use sunscreen will be if they have seen Mom and Dad using it."

Dr. Berger points out that not all

sunscreens are created equal. "We used to think that only UVB rays would give you a sunburn," she says. "Now we know that UVA rays can also cause skin damage. Look for sunscreens with zinc, titanium dioxide, or parsol 1789 (also known as avobenzone). They'll protect your skin from both types of damaging rays."

Other prevention tips include avoiding exposure during peak burning hours (generally from ten to three every day), and covering up with a hat, sunglasses, and long, loosely-fitting clothing. You should also stay away from tanning beds. "Some salons will tell you that your body needs the Vitamin D that is produced

Today, Cowlisshaw has a different perspective: "When someone says 'you look like you got some sun,' I get paranoid. I cover up, put on sunscreen and wear big floppy hats. Because it runs in families, I tell my siblings and kids to be vigilant, too."

Those with a family history of skin cancer do need to be especially watchful, but sometimes it is hard to tell between a melanoma and a mole. Warning signs for melanoma include what Dr. Berger refers to as the "ABCDE's." "A" is for asymmetry. Look for a mole or dark spot that is unevenly shaped. "B" is for borders. Look for jagged, uneven borders. "C" is for color. Look for uneven coloring, or coloring that changes or is purplish. "D" is for diameter. Most moles will grow, but look for moles that

The burn you got twenty years ago could be what causes you problems today.

grow quickly or get larger than a pencil eraser. "E" is for evolution. A mole that is changing, growing, itching, bleeding, or is giving you a bad feeling is suspicious.

If you spot any of these signs, don't panic, but do talk to a dermatologist as soon as possible. Melanoma is fairly easily cured in the early stages, but it can be difficult to stop if you wait too long.

"I went to cancer support group after my surgery," says Cowlisshaw. "I started to say 'I was diagnosed with cancer, but it was only melanoma.' Then I realized that I was in denial. There is no 'but.' Melanoma can be deadly!"

May is skin cancer awareness month. For more information, contact your healthcare provider, or check the Skin Cancer Foundation website at www.skincancer.org.

by exposure to sun," says Dr. Berger. "A vitamin supplement or lots of milk is a much safer way to get your Vitamin D."

"Try not to tan," she adds. "Some people tell me, 'I'm going on vacation, and I want to get a base tan so I won't burn.' A base tan will give you the protection of about an SPF 2 sunscreen. That's almost nothing. The best way to avoid getting burned on your vacation is to take sunscreen with you and use it!"

Remember, the effects of skin damage are cumulative, so the burn you got twenty years ago could be what causes you problems today. "I did all the wrong things as a teenager," says Cowlisshaw. "I was raised in Huntington Beach during the 50's and 60's. My friends and I would go get sunburned at the beach every day. We didn't know about skin cancer; we didn't think about sunscreen."

www.skincancer.org