



Too much sun is hazardous to your health

By Louis Kuchnir, M.D., Ph.D.

For physicians who constantly warn patients about skin cancer, a [recent poll](#) by the [Marist Institute for Public Opinion](#) brought some disturbing news: Only one-fifth of Americans use sunscreen before going outdoors during the summer, and another one-third wear it for only a few days during the season.

The poll of more than 1,000 people also discovered that about 40 percent of Americans never use sunscreen at all, and only 9 percent wear it every day.

This lack of self-protection is one reason why skin cancer is the most common form of cancer in the United States.

The two most common types are basal cell carcinoma, found in the lowest layer of the epidermis, and squamous cell carcinoma, found in the middle layer. More than two million of these types are diagnosed every year. Fortunately, both are highly curable.

However, the third type – melanoma – is less common, but more serious. If not detected early, melanoma can be deadly. In its advanced stages, melanoma can spread to the lymph nodes and internal organs. Some 54,000 people are diagnosed with melanomas of the skin every year, according to the Centers for Disease Control. And its incidence has been increasing for the last 30 years, especially among young, white women 15-30 and white adults 65 and older.

As we hit the mid-point of summer, remember that too much fun in the sun can be dangerous. The primary cause of all skin cancers is excessive exposure to the ultraviolet (UV) rays of the sun, which makes the poll results cited above so disturbing. This is the most important [preventable](#) cause of all skin cancers.

Here's more unsettling news from the poll: the age group with the lowest rate of sunscreen use was the 18-29 age group, at a mere 4 percent. In fact, melanoma is the most common form of cancer among young adults 25-29. If we expand the age group to 15-29, we find that melanoma is the second most common form of cancer among that population.

The best way to detect the onset of skin cancer is to recognize changes in your skin, especially for the early stages of melanoma. That means examining your skin, especially the upper back, torso, lower legs, head and neck – places where melanomas tend to occur. If you notice a mole that has changed, or is different from others, you should see a dermatologist to be examined within a week or two.

The good news is that if detected early, melanoma is highly curable. But early detection is [essential](#): a direct correlation exists between the thickness of the melanoma and survival rate. Only five percent of patients whose melanoma has spread to internal organs will survive for six months.

Patients with known risk factors – those with more than 50 or unusual moles, those with blood relatives who have had melanoma, Caucasians with light skin - should be examined annually. Although [people with dark skin](#) are less likely to get melanoma, they should be cautious as well. While Blacks, Asians, Hispanics, and Native Americans develop fewer skin cancers than do whites, the cancer tends to be more aggressive and is more often diagnosed in its later stages.

Remember that sun protection remains the best prevention. Here are some recommendations from the American Academy of Dermatology:

- Use a water-resistant sunscreen with a Sun Protection Factor (SPF) of at least 30.
- Wear protective clothing, like long-sleeved shirts, wide-brimmed hats, and sunglasses.
- Seek shade whenever possible; the sun's rays are strongest between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.
- Use extra caution near water, snow, and sand: they reflect the damaging rays of the sun.
- Get Vitamin D with a healthy diet and supplements; don't try to get your dosage from the sun.
- Avoid tanning beds; ultraviolet light from these is proven to cause all three types of skin cancer.
- Check your skin regularly.
- Protect children, with appropriate clothing and by teaching them sun-safe habits.

For more information on skin cancers and skin disease, visit the American Academy of Dermatology's website www.aad.org or the Skin Cancer Foundation at www.skincancer.org

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