

# Protect yourself from skin cancer

By Kathryn Bowers, M.D.

We love and rely on the sun. The sun is the centre of our universe.

We long for it after days of rain and clouds. We marvel at beautiful sunrises and sunsets.

The sun is essential and is a rich source of Vitamin D, important for good health. Without the sun, life wouldn't exist. Whose mood isn't enhanced by being outside on a warm sunny day?

Even with all those positives, there is a negative side as well. As we enter the warm weather seasons, we should all be aware of the sun's dangers.

Overexposure to sunlight is one of the primary causes of skin cancer, which is rising dramatically and is now the most common form of cancer in the United States.

According to the Skin Cancer Foundation, one and a half million new cases of skin cancer are diagnosed every year. The most serious type -- melanoma - is being diagnosed at twice the rate it was 20 years ago.

The most common forms of skin cancer -- basal cell and squamous cell carcinoma (named for their point of origin within the skin) -- have nearly tripled in women under 40 since the 1970s. With early detection and treatment, cure rates for both basal cell and squamous cell exceed 95 percent.

Malignant melanoma is the most deadly form of skin cancer. It develops in the skin's cells that produce the dark protective pigment called melanin, which makes the skin tan. The American Cancer Society estimates that more than 60,000 people will develop melanoma this year, with nearly 8,000 dying from the disease. By 2010, one in 50 at risk Americans will develop melanoma in their lifetime. Melanoma is highly curable if caught early.

The warning signs of melanoma are changes in the surface of a mole; such as irregular border, color, surface or shape. Symptoms of concern include scaliness, oozing, itching, tenderness, pain or bleeding. The appearance of a new bump on the skin that grows and changes warrants a visit to the doctor.

While skin cancer can affect anyone, some people are more at risk than others. Light-skinned individuals, people with a family or personal history of skin cancer (especially melanoma), those with a history of sunburns early in life, those with a large number of moles, and people with freckles (which indicates sun sensitivity and sun damage) should take extra precautions.

Our skin is the largest organ in our body, covering and protecting everything else inside us. So it's critical that we take good care of our skin. Here are some ways to protect yourself:

- Minimize exposure to the sun. As the sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays are the main villain in causing skin cancer, the most effective preventive method is sun avoidance. Twenty minutes of mid day sun on the backs of the hands has been promoted as adequate for Vitamin D production, but many studies are being done in this controversial area.
- When in the sun, wear sunglasses with UV protection ratings, hats and appropriate clothing. There are several light weight clothing lines that have a SPF (Sun Protection Factor) 30 rating. Remember that UV rays are most intense between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., and clothing can be a better protection than sunscreen.
- Use sunscreen when outside for extended periods. Apply it in advance (20 to 30 minutes before exposure), use an adequate amount, and reapply it about every two hours. Be sure the SPF is 15 or above. And use it even on cloudy days, as UV rays are still present with cloudy or hazy conditions. Check the expiration date of the sunscreen bottle.
- Avoid tanning beds, as these contain the same harmful UV rays and have been linked to melanoma.
- Be extra careful with children, whose skin is more sensitive. People who suffer severe burning as children or teenagers are more at risk for melanoma.
- Develop a routine to inspect your body monthly. Report any changes, especially in moles, to your physician. If you have multiple risk factors for skin cancer, discuss a referral to a dermatologist, a physician specializing in skin diseases.

Melanoma can also occur in areas hidden from the sun such as the retina of the eye, genital skin and the mouth. Have regular examination of these difficult to see areas. You can learn more about skin cancer by visiting the Skin Cancer Foundation at [skincancer.org](http://skincancer.org) or the American Cancer Society at [cancer.org](http://cancer.org).

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