

Skin Cancer: How to Protect Yourself

Skin cancer is the most common kind of cancer. Every year, U.S. healthcare providers diagnose more than 1 million cases of the disease. Most of the time, skin cancer is caused by too much exposure to the sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays. Artificial sources, like tanning booths and sunlamps, also can increase your risk.

Kinds of Skin Cancer

There are two main kinds of skin cancer — non-melanomas and melanomas. Non-melanomas are the most common type and include squamous cell and basal cell cancers. Non-melanomas rarely spread to other parts of the body, but they can cause scarring.

Melanoma is much more serious than non-melanoma cancers. While typically curable in its early stages, it is much more likely to spread to other parts of your body than non-melanomas.

Is It Just a Mole?

Moles are usually an even-colored brown, tan or black spot on the skin. They can be either flat or raised and are usually less than ¼ inch in diameter. Moles usually stay the same shape, size and color for many years and typically fade in older people.

If you spot any changes in color, shape or size of a mole, tell your healthcare provider. It is also important to check your skin regularly for new growths, spots, bumps, patches or sores, and especially to note any that don't heal after 2-3 months.

Squamous cell cancers typically look like growing lumps, and can have a rough, scaly or crusted surface. Basal cell cancers often appear as flat, firm, pale areas, or as small, almost see-through raised shiny waxy areas that can be mostly pink or red. They may bleed if scratched and often have a lower area in the center. They can appear blue, black or brown. Large patches may ooze or have crusted areas.

Melanomas can be detected with the "ABCD rule:"

Asymmetry: Both halves of a mole or birthmark do not match.

Border: The edges are irregular, and often ragged-looking.

Color: The color is not the same all over and can include shades of brown or black, with patches of red, white or blue.

Diameter: The area is larger than ¼ inch and growing.

How Dangerous Are UV Rays?

Both kinds of UV rays (UVA and UVB) can cause cancer. In the short term, exposure to UV rays causes tanning and sun-

burn. Apart from skin cancers, long-term effects can include early-aged skin, wrinkles and "age spots" or "liver spots."

If you have light-colored skin and burn easily, you are typically more at risk for the more serious forms of skin cancer than those with darker skin. But even if you have a darker complexion or you don't burn, UV exposure can still increase your chances of getting skin cancer.

How Can I Protect Myself?

- **Limit sun exposure.** UV rays are most intense between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. If you don't know how strong the sun is, you can do a "shadow test." If your shadow is shorter than you are, the sun's rays are strongest. Remember that UV rays pass through water, too. Sand and snow increase your UV exposure because they reflect sunlight.

- **Cover up.** Long-sleeved shirts, pants and long skirts provide the most protection, and darker colors block more UV rays than light. Choose fabric with a tighter weave for more protection. If you can see light through a fabric, it probably won't block UV rays.

- **Don't forget your hat.** The best hat is one with a 2 or 3-inch brim all around. This protects sensitive facial areas.

- **Sunscreen.** Look for a product with 15 or higher sun protection factor (SPF), and apply it regularly. The higher the number, the better you are protected.

"Broad spectrum" sunscreens protect against UVA and UVB rays. Waterproof sunscreens are usually effective for about 80 minutes, even if you are swimming or sweating. Water-resistant sunscreens will protect you for about 40 minutes on average.

Read the instructions before applying any product. Generally, you will apply sunscreen about 30 minutes before you go outside. About a palmful typically can cover the arms, legs, neck and face of an average adult. Reapply every 2 hours — more if you are swimming or sweating. Use sunscreen lip balm, as well.

- **Wear UV-blocking sunglasses.** Sunglasses should block 99-100 percent of UVA and UVB radiation. Those that say "special purpose" or "meets ANSI UV requirements" block at least 99 percent. Cosmetic lenses generally block 70 percent.

- **Avoid tanning booths and sunlamps.** Both of these kinds of devices give off UVA and UVB rays and put you at risk for skin cancer. ■

Resources

- American Cancer Society (2006). *Sun safety*. Retrieved April 12, 2006 from the World Wide Web: http://www.cancer.org/docroot/PED/PED_7.asp?sitearea=PED.
- GatorSHADE (2006). *Links and documents*. Retrieved April 12, 2006 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.gatorshade.ufl.edu/>.
- National Cancer Institute (2006). *Cancer topics*. Retrieved April 12, 2006 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics>.

—Compiled by Karin Lillis, regional editor at ADVANCE.

The purpose of this patient education handout is to further explain or remind you about a medical condition. This handout is a general guide only. If you have specific questions, be sure to discuss them with your healthcare provider. This handout may be reproduced for distribution to patients.