

Sun & Skin Cancer

Should You Worry?

Skin cancer is the most common type of cancer diagnosed in Americans. Over 1 million new cases of skin cancer will be diagnosed in the United States this year. There are 2 basic types of skin cancer:

- **Melanoma (the most deadly form):** The American Cancer Society predicts that in 2005, about 59,600 new cases of melanoma will be diagnosed, and that about 7,800 people will die from melanoma.
- **Nonmelanoma (basal cell and squamous cell):** The American Cancer Society predicts that over 1 million new cases of nonmelanoma skin cancer will be diagnosed in 2005, but that only 2,800 will die from it.

What are the Risk Factors for Getting Skin Cancer?

- **Excessive and/or unprotected exposure to the ultraviolet (UV) radiation-**
This is the most important risk factor, as most skin cancers are considered to be sun-related
- Having fair skin
- Receiving serious sunburns during childhood
- Having a family history of skin cancer
- Having multiple or atypical moles
- Receiving occupational exposures to arsenic compounds, pitch, coal tar, radium, or creosote

So What Can You Do to Help Prevent Skin Cancer?

- Avoid the sun during midday. The sun's rays are strongest between the hours of 10am and 4pm. Remember that UV rays can pass through water. Be especially careful at the beach or in the snow because the sand and snow can reflect sunlight, increasing the amount of UV radiation. Also, remember to check the UV index if you plan to be outside.
- Cover up! You should remember that a dark, tightly woven fabric will give you the best protection from the sun. Also, wet fabrics do not provide as much protection as dry ones. In other words, a wet, white tee-shirt isn't going to do a whole lot of good.
- Wear a hat. The best type is a wide-brimmed hat that goes all the way around. This way, your ears, eyes, neck, forehead, and nose are all protected. Baseball caps are better than nothing, but don't protect your ears or the back of your neck, which are common places for skin cancer to develop.
- Wear sunscreen. You should use a sunscreen with at least SPF (sun protection factor) 15 regularly. Remember to reapply the product 20 to 30 minutes prior to going outside to let the chemicals absorb, and to reapply after swimming or excessive sweating.
- Don't use tanning beds or sunlamps. If you think that they are harmless, think again! They emit UVA and often UVB rays, which both cause skin damage (think wrinkles!) and contribute to skin cancer growth.

Important Facts to Remember

- It's a good idea to inspect your skin, from head to toe, once a month. It's a good way to get used to what your skin looks like so that if any new growths appear, you will notice them and realize that they are new. If you find something new, see your healthcare provider promptly.
- A nonmelanoma skin cancer will likely be a new growth, bump, spot, patch, or sore that doesn't heal for a couple of months.
- It is imperative that melanoma skin cancer is caught early. When melanoma is localized, the 5-year survival rate is 98%. However, once the cancer has spread to distant sites, the 5-year survival rate is only 16%.
- So how do you know if you may possibly have a melanoma skin cancer?

Look for these signs:

- **A = Asymmetry:** Look for a mole or birthmark where one half doesn't match the other half.
- **B = Border:** The edges will be irregular, blurred, notched, or jagged.
- **C = Color:** The spot is not all one color, and may include shades of brown and black, and sometimes has patches of blue, red, or white.
- **D = Diameter:** The spot is larger than 6mm (think of a pencil eraser) or keeps growing larger.

So remember: baking in the sun will give you a tan that is only temporary, but the damaging effects are permanent. Protecting yourself from the most common type of cancer in America can be simple. So be smart about the sun!