

How Is Your Skin?

A few years ago I was surprised to learn that a young coworker had been diagnosed with melanoma. She said that she was not really surprised to have received this diagnosis, since she grew up spending many hours as a teen in a tanning bed and in the sun trying for a fabulous, dark tan. She admitted to giving little regard to the need for sunscreen. With the summer rays enticing me to go outside and thoughts of my coworker, I decided to research facts about skin and skin cancer.

Skin cancer is the most common form of cancer in the United States. More people are diagnosed with skin cancer each year in the U.S. than all other forms of cancer combined. Skin cancer begins in the epidermis or outer layer of the skin. The epidermis is made up of three kinds of cells; squamous, basal, and melanocytes. Squamous cell and basal cell cancer, two most common types of skin cancer, are highly curable. Melanoma, the third most common skin cancer, is far more dangerous but has an estimated five-year survival rate of 99 percent if detected early.

Anyone can get skin cancer but individuals with certain characteristics are at greater risk. These risks include:

- A lighter natural skin color.
- Skin that burns, freckles, reddens easily or becomes painful in the sun.
- Blue or green eyes.
- Blond or red hair.
- Certain types and a large number of moles.
- Family history of skin cancer.
- Personal history of skin cancer.
- Older age.

About 90 percent of nonmelanoma and melanoma skin cancers are associated with exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun. UV rays, an invisible kind of radiation, come from the sun, tanning beds and sunlamps. Contrary to popular belief, a tan does not indicate good health. When UV rays reach the skin's inner layer, the skin makes more melanin. Melanin is the pigment that gives skin color and becomes visible as a tan. Unprotected skin can be damaged by the sun's UV rays in as little as 15 minutes. Any change in the color of the skin after UV exposure, whether tan or burn, is a sign of skin damage. Even a few serious sun burns can increase your risk of getting skin cancer, and having five or more sunburns doubles your risk for melanoma. Indoor tanning devices can emit UV radiation up to 15 times higher than the sun at its peak intensity.

So how are you going to protect your skin? For the best protection, use sunscreen that includes UVA and UVB protection (labeled as broad spectrum) and has a sun protection factor (SPF) of 15 or higher. Don't forget to protect your ears, nose, lips and the tops of your feet. If you are going to be outside for a while, be sure to reapply sunscreen at least every 2

hours. If you are swimming, you may need to reapply sunscreen more often. Contrary to popular belief, you can still get a sunburn on a cloudy day because clouds filter UV rays rather than blocking them. Protection from UV rays is important all year, not just during the summer, as they can reflect off of surfaces like water, cement, sand and snow. While sunscreen does reduce damage from UV radiation, it does not eliminate it. In the continental United States, UV rays are strongest from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. DST.

In addition to sunscreen, other ways to protect your body from UV rays include staying in the shade, wearing clothing that covers your arms and legs, wearing a wide brim hat to shade your face, head, ears and neck, and wearing sunglasses that wrap around and block both UVA and UVB rays. Even if you are well covered, it is wise to also use sunscreen and to choose the shade when you can to limit the amount of UV rays that you receive.

Ultraviolet (UV) rays from the sun can stimulate the production of vitamin D in the skin. Little or no sun exposure may put an individual at risk for low levels of vitamin D. The production of vitamin D in the body is a personal matter depending on many factors including skin tone, geographic location, weather conditions and time of day and year. The skin can produce a limited amount of vitamin D and there is no known level of UV exposure that would increase vitamin D levels without increasing the risk of skin cancer. Vitamin D can be obtained safely from foods including some types of fish, egg yolks, and foods with added vitamin D like cereals, juices and dairy products. Dietary supplements with your physician's recommendation are another way of obtaining Vitamin D without overexposure to UV rays.

The bottom line is that exposure to the sun's UV rays can damage your skin and be detrimental to your overall health. For the best protection against skin cancer, use sunscreen when in the sun, monitor the length of time in the sun, seek cover and shade when outside, especially during midday, avoid tanning beds, and see a physician if you notice any skin changes. Have a safe, fun summer!

It is not too late to get a COVID-19 vaccine to protect yourself and others in your community!

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References:

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