



Protect Yourself from
Skin Cancer
by Using Your
Sun Smarts

Overexposed

Like many kids of the 1970s and '80s, Jennifer Sellers got her share of blistering sunburns. As a teen, she was not a regular (or frequent) sunbather, but when she *did* lay out with friends, she'd slather on the baby oil in pursuit of that all-important tan. Fast-forward to 2003, when a small, freckly sun spot developed on her face, gradually turning into a mole. Sellers followed her instincts and saw a dermatologist, who removed the mole.



"I waited for two long weeks for test results to come back," says Sellers, a managing editor for a magazine publishing group in Greensboro, NC. Upon finally receiving the diagnosis, malignant melanoma, she says, "it was one of the most surreal and frightening moments of my life." While Sellers has light skin, hair and eyes, she had no family history of the disease. Next thing she knew, additional surrounding skin was being removed and tested. After two more agonizing weeks, the results came back clean. Thanks to Sellers' persistence, her melanoma was caught early enough to be considered "in situ" (noninvasive).

According to The Skin Cancer Foundation, more than 1 million people will be diagnosed with skin cancer this year. Incidence of melanoma, the deadliest form, is now rising faster than any other cancer. More than 90 percent of all skin cancers are caused by sun exposure; yet, fewer than 33 percent of adults and children routinely use sun protection.

So, as you pack for a summer vacation, make sure you include the following: sun-protective clothing, a wide-brimmed hat, sunglasses and sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 15 or higher. Plan your itinerary to avoid direct sun exposure from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Everybody loves the warmth of the sun, but when you leave your skin unprotected from its damaging rays, you're playing with fire.

Red Alert

Skin cancers are classified into two general types—nonmelanoma and melanoma. Of the nonmelanoma skin cancers—so called because they include all skin cancers except malignant melanoma—the most prevalent are basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma.

Basal cell carcinoma, the most treatable and least likely to spread, accounts for about 75 percent of all skin cancers. A basal cell carcinoma typically appears as a non-healing lesion on the face, neck, chest or back. Squamous cell carcinomas are also easily treated, though slightly more apt to spread. A squamous cell cancer often appears as a scaly red patch on sun-exposed areas. While both types have a better than 95 percent cure rate if detected and treated early, someone diagnosed with one nonmelanoma skin cancer is at increased risk for developing another.

The most serious form of skin cancer and that which causes the majority of skin cancer deaths is melanoma. Melanomas usually start as moles. While they can be found anywhere on the body, they appear most frequently on the upper back, the leg or, as in Sellers' case, the face. Any changes to the mole are key—this simple ABCD rule outlines the warning signs of melanoma:

- **A**symmetry—one half doesn't match the other
- **B**order irregularity—ragged edges
- **C**olor—not uniform throughout
- **D**iameter—usually greater than 6 millimeters

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Someone who's had one melanoma is at increased risk for developing another melanoma or a nonmelanoma skin cancer.

Among the most preventable contributing factors of developing melanoma is overexposure to the sun's ultraviolet radiation. Says Susan Chon, MD, assistant professor of dermatology at the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center, "One of the independent risk factors for melanoma is a history of blistering sunburns in childhood."

Other risk factors for skin cancer include a history of abnormal moles or a large number of them (50 or more); a family history of skin cancer, particularly melanoma; weakened immune system; and exposure to environmental hazards. Risk increases with age, as many skin cancers grow slowly. Thus, sun damage doesn't show immediately.

While anyone can develop skin cancer, Caucasians are 10 times more likely to develop melanoma than are other races. Most at risk are individuals with fair or freckled skin that burns easily, light eyes, and blond or red hair. Still, those with dark skin are not immune. According to a USC study released in January, the rate of melanomas among Latino males in California is growing at double the rate for whites.

Slip, Slop, Slap

One in five Americans will develop skin cancer during their lifetime, says the American Academy of Dermatology. Since sun protection significantly decreases risk, you should defend your skin.

Says Martin Weinstock, MD, PhD, professor of dermatology and community health at Brown University and chair of the American Cancer Society's Skin Cancer Advisory Board, "The way to protect yourself when you're outdoors is 'Slip, Slop, Slap.' *Slip* on a shirt, *slop* on the sunscreen, *slap* on a hat."

Teach children the basics of sun protection and practice what you preach. "Slip, Slop, Slap" is easy for kids to remember. Adolescents and teens may be particularly susceptible to sun damage because their cells are dividing and changing so rapidly. "Infants and toddlers should especially avoid the sun as much as possible because their skin is much more sensitive to the sun's effects," says Dr. Chon. Protect children under 6 months old with clothing and shade.

Today, various manufacturers offer sun-protective clothing lines evaluated for their ultraviolet protection factor (UPF). Among the items available are shirts, cover-ups, pants and hats. (See sidebar for specific companies.) "They've tried to combine sun protection with comfort, which makes clothes lighter, more breathable," says Dr. Chon. If you wear regular clothing, choose heavier, dark-colored fabrics with a tight weave (i.e., no light shows through).

Select a hat with a brim at least 3 inches around. Baseball caps have limited sun protection. Hats are essential for those who are balding, due to increased risk for scalp cancer.

Wear sunglasses with broad UV protection and make sure



TO LEARN MORE

The Skin Cancer Foundation
(800) 754-6490
www.skincancer.org

For a comprehensive list of products (including sunscreens) that carry the Skin Cancer Foundation Seal of Recommendation, visit:

www.skincancer.org/aboutus/seal.php

American Cancer Society
(800) ACS-2345
www.cancer.org

American Academy of Dermatology's SkinCancerNet
www.skincarephysicians.com/skincancernet/index.html

Companies that sell sun-protective clothing include:

Coolibar
www.coolibar.com

Sun Precautions
www.sunprecautions.com

For others, do a Web search on "sun-protective clothing."

they're large enough to cover the entire eye area. (Melanomas can develop here as well.)

Sunscreen Savvy

While the official recommendation of the American Cancer Society, Skin Cancer Foundation and American Academy of Dermatology is to use sunscreen with an SPF of at least 15, many experts (including those quoted here) suggest an SPF 30 or higher.

Says Amy Taub, MD, clinical instructor at Northwestern University Medical School and a spokesperson for The Skin Cancer Foundation, "The reason I say for people to use a 30 is for the very fact that when they test sunscreens to give them their [SPF] rating, they apply significantly more than the average person does." Remember "Slip, Slop, Slap?" You should literally *slop* sunscreen on your arms, legs, neck, face and ears—a full ounce for an adult. (Don't forget sunscreen lip balm.)

Sun & Sports

And what do those SPF numbers mean? Does 30 SPF offer twice the protection of 15? The answer is no. Look at it this way: With an SPF 4, a total of one-fourth, or 25 percent, of the sun's burning rays get through, so SPF 4 blocks 75 percent. Using that formula, SPF 15 blocks 93 percent. "As the numbers get higher, it's of diminishing returns," says Dr. Weinstock, "... at 30, you're already at 97 percent. Beyond that, you're not going to get a lot extra."

What's the difference between sunblock and sunscreen? Sunblocks, such as zinc oxide and titanium dioxide, prevent the ultraviolet from penetrating the skin's upper layers. Sunscreen doesn't prevent actual penetration but does prevent damage to living cells below the surface layers. Obviously, sunblocks are most effective. Many sun protection products contain both. Dr. Taub recommends purchasing a product with zinc oxide as an active ingredient. "Apply it at least 30 minutes before your exposure," she says, "because it needs to be absorbed by your skin to be effective." Reapply most sunscreens every two hours.

And if your vacation destination lies closer to the equator than does your hometown, as is often the case, be extra vigilant. Limit the time you're out and avoid direct sun exposure between 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. when rays are strongest. Be aware of the sun's intense reflective powers off sand and water—UV rays also reach below the water's surface.

Contrary to some advertising campaigns, tanning booths are *not* safe. UV rays from tanning beds are just as harmful as those from natural sunlight, perhaps more so. "They're primarily UVA rays, which penetrate the skin deeper," says Dr. Chon. "They're cancer-promoting and they cause a lot of aging effects of the skin. So, overall, you're paying for someone to basically damage your skin." As a safe alternative, use sunless spray tanners, available at cosmetic counters or applied professionally in salons.

The Third Degree

Finally, become familiar with all your moles and blemishes so you can identify any changes. According to The Skin Cancer Foundation, the best way to catch skin cancer early is through an annual skin exam by a doctor and a monthly self-exam. Using both full-length and handheld mirrors, inspect yourself head to toe. A changing, new or unsightly mole requires prompt medical attention.

"If you're someone who's high risk to begin with, you may be appropriate for a periodic exam by a dermatologist," says Dr. Weinstock. "I think it's reasonable for everyone to get a single examination by a dermatologist early in their adult lives to determine whether they are, in fact, at high risk for melanoma in particular."

Says Jennifer Sellers who developed melanoma at age 28, "The moral of my story, I believe, is 'Know your body and trust your instincts—and, of course, educate yourself.'" ●



Whether your favorite sport takes you onto the links or into the lineup, if you expose your skin to the sun's damaging ultraviolet rays for an extended period of time, you consequently increase your risk of skin cancer. So golfers, surfers and other good sports, listen up! Where your skin is concerned, extra precautions are par for the course.

If you golf, the most important thing in your golf bag is *not* that new driver. Amy Taub, MD, clinical instructor at Northwestern University Medical School and a spokesperson for The Skin Cancer Foundation, recommends applying a sunscreen of at least 30 SPF—get a sports lotion that won't drip into your eyes—30 minutes before going out. Put a stick sunscreen in your bag and, at the turn, wipe off the sweat and stick up. "Then [your] hands don't have to touch the goo," says Dr. Taub. Wear sun-protective clothing, a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses with broad UV protection. When it comes to your skin, prime tee times are early in the morning or late in the afternoon.

If you're a surfer, as soon as you hear, "Surf's up," slop on some waterproof (or at least *water-resistant*) sunscreen rated SPF 30 or higher. Be sure to reapply once you've hit the beach (remember the sunscreen lip balm) and every couple of hours after that. If you're not wearing a wetsuit in the water, wear a rash guard or sun-protective shirt. Back on the beach, add a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses. And try to catch your waves outside that intense midday window of 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

If you're an outdoors enthusiast of any type, examine your skin regularly. Look for sores that don't heal or moles that suddenly appear. Also, ask your doctor to check your skin during annual checkups. Any rapidly changing spots should be checked by a dermatologist immediately. Remember, good sports protect their skin!