

Are You at Risk for Skin Cancer?

Most sun burns occur during the summer months, so this advice is very timely. Please remember to wear sunscreen daily, and avoid exposure to the damaging ultraviolet rays of the sun and tanning beds. If you must have a tan, remember that there *are* safe, self-tanning products available. It may seem inconvenient and trivial today to take these precautions, but about 30 or 40 years from now you'll be thankful you did!

The Skin Cancer rate is reaching epidemic proportions, due to changes in lifestyle and a desire for a "rich-and-famous" looking tan. Know the risks of exposure to the sun *and* tanning beds before you start tanning — it could save your life.

1. Have you had three or more blistering sunburns before age 20?
2. Do you have red or blond hair, and fair skin that burns easily?
3. Do you have lots of freckles on your upper back?
4. Has anyone in your family had melanoma?
5. Do you have rough red spots on parts of your body that are seldom--or never--exposed to the sun's rays?
6. As a teenager, did you work at least three summers outdoors?

If you answered "yes" even to only three of the questions above, your risk of developing a melanoma is 20 to 25 times higher than that of the general population.

How to Save Your Skin

We used to believe that the sun's rays funneled health into our bodies. After all, we look healthy with a tan: The darker the tan, the more robust we appear — right? Besides, the sun puts vitamin D into our skin — right?

Wrong. Except for the part about vitamin D, we've learned that these ideas are very dangerous to our health. The "healthy look" is an illusion.

The relatively modern craving for a suntanned skin has in recent years ignited a worldwide epidemic of deadly melanoma, a skin cancer that experts recently have projected to kill 6500 Americans annually — with one in every 105 contracting melanoma in a lifetime and facing a 1-in-5 chance of dying of it.

Melanoma is increasing faster than any other cancer in the United States. Ten years ago it was unusual to see someone under 40 with melanoma. Now it is common in people in their 20s and 30s.

The earth's protective ozone layer is dwindling twice as rapidly as had been expected. Worldwide data gathered by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's satellites moved the EPA to predict that the thinning of the atmosphere's ozone shield will admit even more of the sun's harmful ultraviolet rays and lead to as many as 12 million skin cancer deaths in the United States in the course of the next 50 years.

The depletion of ozone worsens approaching the North and South poles. In the US, it is worst in areas north of a line reaching from Reno, Nev., to Denver to Philadelphia. Large parts of Europe and regions around the equator also are affected. Worst in the world, however, is the "ozone hole" detected over Antarctica during the winter months. The depletion of ozone previously was thought to cease in warmer months, but it now has been found to continue into April and May, when people start spending more time outdoors.

Australia, south of the equator, with plenty of sunshine and many fair-haired, fair-skinned citizens of Anglo-Saxon and Celtic origin who like the great outdoors, has the highest cancer rate in the world.

Australia holds a yearly National Skin Cancer Awareness Week, during which literature and posters are distributed and dermatologists hold free skin-cancer screenings.

Early Detection is The Key

A cancer quite new and thin — only 1/32 of an inch, as slim as a postcard — can promise you almost a 100 percent cure rate. At this stage, doctors can excise the melanoma. Up to 4/32 of an inch, your survival rate drops 50 percent. If a growth exceeds that thickness, your life expectancy plummets. Clearly, getting a doctor's care promptly is a matter of life or death.

Once a cancer penetrates a couple layers of skin, its wild cells break loose and travel the tiny canals of the body to lodge in the liver, brain, kidneys and other sites on the skin. There they settle and form ever larger clumps, choking the organs they have invaded.

The 'ABCD' System

For early detection, the "**ABCD**" system can help you identify a cancer or a potential cancer on your body.

A stands for Asymmetry, or irregularity of shape — meaning that you cannot draw a line through it to create matching halves. Non-cancerous pigmented lesions usually are round and symmetrical (when cut down the middle, their halves have matching shapes), but early malignant melanomas usually are asymmetrical.

B is for irregular Border — common to cancerous growths. Benign growths usually have regular margins.

C is for Color. A harmless growth generally is one color overall and flat. Cancerous growths, however, harbor various shades—from tan and brown to black, sometimes mixed in with pink or red or white.

D is for Diameter. If the growth measures more than 6 millimeters across (about 1/4"), it is dangerous.

All of us, black-skinned to fair, need sun protection. The sun's ultraviolet light harms our skin, including the soles of our feet and our palms. There is evidence that damage done during childhood and the teen years creates the greatest risk, so we must teach small children caution.

To avoid trouble, heed these pointers from [The Skin Cancer Foundation](#):

- 1) Avoid the sun, especially between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m.
- 2) Wear a broad-brimmed hat to shade the face; wear long pants and long sleeves.
- 3) If you must expose your skin to the ultraviolet light, use sunscreens rated 30, or higher — it will take you 30 times longer to get sunburned. Sunscreens do not filter out all the ultraviolet rays, so proceed with caution.

The future is bright for those who get immediate care for melanoma; dim for patients with advanced melanomas, but anticancer work being done worldwide inspires hope.

While some sun exposure is beneficial for vitamin D production, about 10 to 15 minutes a day, three times per week is sufficient to provide the body's vitamin D requirements. Otherwise, it's best to wear sunscreen. Better yet, stay out of the sun, altogether, and **examine yourself regularly** for the deadly growths.

Also, remember that self-tanning products are a safe alternative to UV exposure. Artificial tan technology is so advanced today that it's comparable to a natural tan. Tanning beds are NOT a safe alternative.