

Skin Cancer: The Good and the Bad

Learn the Facts

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May is National Skin Cancer awareness month. It is essential that we all understand the importance of learning about skin cancer since currently it is the most prevalent of all types of cancer. The incidence of skin cancer is increasing at an alarming rate. It is estimated that more than one million Americans develop skin cancer every year. Each hour, one person dies from skin cancer.

Fair-skinned individuals who sunburn more easily are at a higher risk for developing skin cancer. Major factors associated with skin cancer are a history of sun exposure and tanning, repeated medical and industrial exposure to x-rays, family history, exposure to coal and arsenic, and history of transplant or immunosuppression. Ozone depletion is a contributing cause to the rising incidence of skin cancer.

Skin cancer is developing in younger people. In my practice, I have a few patients in their twenties that have developed skin cancer. Skin cancer is more prevalent in the male population, and unfortunately this group is the most difficult to attract to having a yearly skin exam. It is usually the intervention of the wife or significant other that moves the male group to seek medical attention. The good news is that many cases of skin cancer are preventable. All it takes is being sun smart and educated to prevent the disease and to be able to detect it early enough to be curable. This is my goal everyday in my office, and it is what I intend by writing this article.

Two Types

There are two types of skin cancer: **Melanoma (THE BAD)** and **Non-Melanoma (THE GOOD)**. There are significant differences between these groups, and it is important to learn to differentiate them since the prognosis and mortality for each group is significantly different, being worse for the melanoma type.

Within the non-melanoma group are

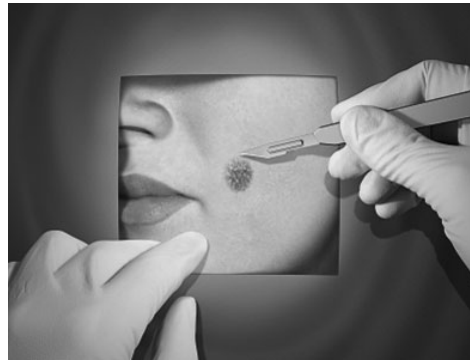


Basal cell carcinoma (BCC) and **Squamous cell carcinoma (SCC)**.

BCC is the most common type of skin cancer, appearing frequently on the head, neck and hands of male patients and on the chest and legs of females. Sun exposure plays an important role in the development of this type of skin cancer. It presents as a small, pearly or fleshy bump, nodule or red patch, sometimes ulcerated. BCC is frequently found in fair-skinned people and rarely occur in dark skin. BCC does not spread quickly; it can take many months or years to grow to a diameter of one centimeter. However, if left untreated it will become bothersome, bleeding and crusting, spreading and causing extensive local damage. BCC does not spread to other parts of the body, so when is treated correctly the patient is cured. Patients that have had BCC may develop more in the future and should be screened once a year.

SCC is the second most common type of skin cancer; it is primarily found in fair-skinned people and rarely in dark-skinned individuals. Typical locations are the rim of the ear, the face, lips and mouth. Sun exposure also plays an important role in the etiology of this type of skin cancer. It may appear as a bump or as a red scaly patch or plaque or just an area or ulceration that does not heal. SCC can develop into a large mass and become invasive. If neglected, SCC can spread to other parts of the body; therefore, it is important to get early treatment. When

found early and treated properly, the cure rate for both BCC and SCC is well over 95%.



The Most Deadly

Malignant Melanoma is the most deadly of all skin cancers. Melanoma is attributed to over 75% of all skin cancer deaths each year. The death rate, however, is declining because melanoma is usually curable when detected in its early stages, and patients are seeking help sooner. Excessive sun exposure, especially sunburn, is the most important preventable cause of melanoma. Lighted-skinned individuals are at particularly high risk. Heredity also plays a part. A person has an increased risk of developing melanoma if a relative or close family member has had melanoma. My grandfather died of melanoma when I was five years old, and he is one of the main reasons I became a Dermatopathologist. Moles or other spots on the skin should be self-examined once a month, looking for changes in size, color or bleeding. Atypical moles, which may run in families, and a large number of moles can serve as markers to identify people at increased risk of developing melanoma. Dark skin is not a guarantee against melanoma. People with a dark complexion can also develop melanoma, especially on the palms, soles, genitalia, under the nails, or in the mouth.

If neglected, melanoma can spread to the lymphatics, lung, brain, liver and other organs and become rapidly lethal. Melanoma may appear suddenly or begin in or near a mole or another dark spot in the skin. It is really important to know the **ABCDs of Melanoma**(that recently were expanded to **ABCDEs**: **A** is for asymmetry; **B** is for Borders that are irregular; **C** is for color that is not uniform and with different shades; **D** is for diameter greater than six millimeters; and **E** is for an evolving lesion that is showing

changes in size, color and elevation.

Self-examination and Prevention

It is crucial to know the warning signs of melanoma: changes in the surface or a mole, scaliness, oozing, bleeding, spread of pigment from the border into the surrounding skin, and change in sensation including itchiness, tenderness or pain. It is really important to learn to know the location and appearance of the moles on the body to detect early changes. Any changing mole must be examined by a physician. Develop a routine to inspect your body for any skin changes. I recommend to my patients to examine their bodies after they shower in front of a mirror.

It is wise to have an annual skin exam by a dermatologist. The best defense against skin cancer is ultraviolet light avoidance (sunlight and tanning beds). Wear sunscreen all year long; seek shade between 10 am and 3 pm. Teach your kids to wear sunscreen.

The most important approach in the diagnosis and treatment is early detection. Melanoma can be curable if diagnosed early. There is an array of medical and surgical procedures and treatments available, depending upon the type of cancer, the location and the needs of every individual. Early detection and removal offers the best chance for a cure.

Have you had your skin checked lately? If you haven't what are you waiting for? May is the month to celebrate Motherhood, but is also skin cancer awareness and prevention month. So please buy flowers for your mom and get your skin cancer screening done. It can save your life.

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appointment at 513-
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