

Skin Cancer

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What is it?

Skin cancer is the uncontrolled growth and reproduction of abnormal skin cells. The two most common kinds of skin cancer are *basal cell carcinoma* and *squamous cell carcinoma*. Basal cell carcinoma is a slow growing cancer that accounts for more than ninety percent (90%) of all skin cancers in the United States. Squamous cell carcinoma rarely spreads, but it does so more often than basal cell carcinoma.

Another type of skin cancer is *melanoma*, which begins in the melanocytes or pigment producing cells, and is the leading cause of death from diseases of the skin. Usually, in early stages, when it can be easily treated, the disease is not life threatening. In later stages, malignant melanoma spreads deeply in the skin and to other parts of the body.

What causes it?

Although no one knows for sure what causes skin cancer, there are several risk factors which increase the chance of getting skin cancer.

Risk factors

- Fair skin.
- Red or blonde hair.
- Light-colored eyes.
- Sunburning easily.
- Having many unusual moles or birthmarks.
- Working or playing outside.
- Excessive sun exposure as a child.
- Multiple serious sunburns.
- Family history of skin cancer.

The sun is bad for skin because the sun's rays, which are called *ultraviolet A* and *ultraviolet B* rays (UVA & UVB), damage your skin, even if you don't burn. This leads to early wrinkles, skin cancer and other skin problems. A tan is the body's desperate attempt to protect itself from the sun's harmful rays. There is no such thing as a safe suntan.

Tanning booths also use ultraviolet rays. Makers of the tanning booths may claim that they use "harmless" UVA rays, but both UVA & UVB rays cause skin damage. While UVA rays take longer than UVB rays to damage the skin, they go deeper than UVB rays.

Who gets it?

Each year more than 600,000 people in the United States learn they have skin cancer. It is the most common type of cancer in the United States. According to current estimates, 40 to 50 percent of Americans who live to age 65 will have skin cancer at least once.

What are the symptoms?

The main thing to look for is **change** on the skin, especially a new growth or a sore that doesn't heal. Any mole that appears after age 30 is suspicious. Other signs of skin cancer include a mole that bleeds or is itchy, or a mole that is fast growing. Approximately 50% of melanomas begin in pre-existing moles.

Warning signs

The ABCDE Rule

- **A** for *Asymmetry*: A mole that, when divided in half, doesn't look the same on both sides.
- **B** for *Border*: A mole with edges that are blurry, jagged, or uneven.
- **C** for *Color*: Changes in the color of a mole, including darkening, spread of color, loss of color, or the appearance of multiple colors, such as blue, red, white, pink, purple or gray.
- **D** for *Diameter*: A mole larger than a pencil eraser (6 mm or 1/4" across from edge to edge).
- **E** for *Elevation*: A mole that is raised above the skin and has an uneven surface.

Most skin cancers appear on parts of the body that are repeatedly exposed to the sun. These areas include the head, neck, face, tips of the ears, hands, forearms, shoulders, back, chests of men, and the back and lower legs of women. Even so, skin cancer can occur anywhere. Precancerous spots called *actinic keratosis* may also be identified and treated before they turn into cancers. It is important to see your family doctor if any symptoms last longer than a few weeks. Don't wait for the area to hurt. Skin cancers seldom cause pain.

How do you prevent it?

The key is to avoid excessive exposure to the sun or using sunlamps. If you're going to be in the sun for an extended length of time, wear dark clothes made from tight woven cloth - silk is the most protective, cotton is good also when dry. Wear a hat to protect your face, neck and ears. Clothing designed specifically for sun protection is now available from Frogskin (800-328-4440), Solar Protective Factory (800-SUN-BLOCK), and Sun Precautions (800-882-7860)

Remember that clouds and water won't protect you. 60 to 80 percent of the sun's rays can get through clouds and reach swimmers one foot below the surface of the water. The sun's rays can also reflect off of water, snow, white sand and concrete.

If you can't protect yourself by staying out of the sun or wearing the right kind of clothing, you should use sunscreen to help protect your skin. Sunscreens with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 15 or more block the majority of the damaging rays. Be sure you put the sunscreen everywhere the sun's rays might touch you, including your ears, the back of your neck and bald areas of your scalp. Put more on every 2 hours if you're sweating or swimming.

Tips on Preventing Skin Cancer

- Minimize sun exposure, especially from 10:00 to 2:00, when the sun's rays are strongest.
- Use sunscreen every time you're out in the sun.
- Don't use tanning booths or sunlamps.
- Wear protective clothing and hats.

It's okay to use sunscreen if you're pregnant. Sunscreen isn't recommended for use on babies younger than six months old. If your baby is this young, keep him or her out of the sun. Be very cautious with a baby at the beach, because reflected sunlight from sand and water can burn a baby's tender skin, even in the shade of a beach umbrella. For children older than six months, use one of the PABA-free sunscreens, like Water Babies. Teach children about sun protection since one severe burn during childhood *doubles* the lifetime risk of developing skin cancer.

Can it be treated?

Treatment for skin cancer usually involves some type of surgery. Rarely, doctors suggest chemotherapy or radiation therapy.

- **Cryosurgery** can be used to treat precancerous skin conditions as well as certain small skin cancers. In cryosurgery, liquid nitrogen is applied to freeze and kill the abnormal cells. More than one freezing may be needed to remove the growth completely. Usually cryosurgery leaves no scar, or at most a very small whitish scar.

- **Surgery** can often be performed quickly and easily. In fact, the cancer is sometimes completely removed at the time of biopsy, and no further treatment is needed.

- **Curettage and electrodesiccation** treats the cancer by scooping out the cancer cells with a curette and then passing an electrical current from a special machine to control bleeding and kill cancer cells remaining around the edge of the wound. Most patients develop a flat, white scar.

- **Topical chemotherapy** is the use of anticancer drugs in a cream or lotion applied to the skin. Actinic keratosis can be treated effectively with the anticancer drug 5-FU. This treatment is also useful for cancers limited to the top layer of skin. Intense inflammation is common during treatment, but scars are rare.

Are there complications?

Skin cancer has a better prognosis than most other types of cancer. It is curable in over 95% of cases. However, if not discovered early, some skin cancers, especially melanoma, can spread to other parts of the body and become life threatening.

In summary

- The signs of skin cancer can be remembered using the ABCDE Rule.
- The best way to avoid skin cancer is to protect yourself from the sun with protective clothing or use sunscreen with an SPF of 15 or more.
- Regular self-examination is important to see early skin changes which may be cancerous.
- For more information, call the NIH National Cancer Institute at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237) or www.cancer.gov