

► SKIN CANCER ◀

Skin is your body's largest and most visible organ. Among other functions, it protects our internal systems, regulates body temperature and acts as our sensory organ for touch. Since it is constantly exposed to the stresses of everyday living, your skin can take a beating. Some skin problems, such as dryness and thinning, occur naturally during the aging process and are mostly harmless. Other conditions, such as a rapid growth that may indicate skin cancer, are dangerous and potentially deadly. Protecting yourself with an effective sunscreen while outdoors and regularly checking your skin for any changes can help prevent sun damage and detect skin cancer early. Below are answers to some frequently asked questions about skin cancer.

What are the warning signs of skin cancer?

Skin cancer is the most prevalent of all cancers. Fortunately, the two most common types of skin cancer have well over a 95 percent cure rate because they can be readily recognized and successfully treated in their early stages. However, late detection and treatment can often result in a cosmetic disfigurement or internal spread, so watch for these warning signs and bring them to your doctor's attention immediately:

- **Basal cell cancer**, a nonmelanoma, is the most common type of skin cancer. This tumor may show up as a smooth, shiny lump which sometimes bleeds or develops a crust; as a flat, red spot; or as a firm, red lump.
- **Squamous cell cancer**, also a nonmelanoma, can be similar in appearance to basal cell skin cancer. It shows up as a rough, scaly patch or as a small, rounded lump that bleeds and does not heal. If not detected early, squamous cell cancer can spread to other parts of the body.
- **Malignant melanoma** is the most serious type of skin cancer and is rapidly becoming an epidemic in the United States. This tumor may prove fatal or spread to other organs if left untreated; it has a much lower survival rate than other skin cancers. Melanoma, like other skin cancers, is painless at the beginning. It often appears as a brownish-black patch with an asymmetrical shape, irregular border, and nonuniform pigmentation. Also be aware of any changes in the surface or size of a mole, which could indicate melanoma.

What causes skin cancer?

Dermatologists agree that ultraviolet radiation from the sun is the leading cause of skin cancer. Even sunlamps and tanning booths emit ultraviolet rays that can contribute to skin cancer and premature aging and should not be considered safe alternatives to sunbathing. What's more, it's not just a week at the beach soaking up the sun that is potentially dangerous to your skin and your health. Ultraviolet rays are present all year long, and you're exposed to them daily and constantly doing the most

continued on back

continued from front page

routine things – exercising outdoors, eating lunch at an outside cafe, walking to and from work. Doctors expect the skin cancer scourge to worsen in the future because of the thinning of the earth's protective ozone layer, which filters out harmful ultraviolet rays. Other less important factors, but skin cancer contributors nevertheless, include radiation therapy, scarring from disease or burns, a family history of skin cancer and occupational exposure to certain compounds.

Who is at risk for developing skin cancer?

Anyone can get skin cancer; no one is immune. However, years of unprotected sunbathing dramatically increase your risk of getting cancer. People most susceptible to developing this disease spend much of their time in the sun without proper protection, have red or blond hair, blue or light-colored eyes and fair skin that tends to freckle or burn rather than tan. African Americans can develop skin cancer as well, although their incidence is much lower than light-skinned people because they have a higher concentration of melanin, which helps protect their skin from the harmful effects of ultraviolet radiation. Despite this innate protection, ultraviolet rays can still promote premature aging and wrinkles in dark-skinned people.

Melanoma poses the most serious risk for people with many moles. Researchers have also found that people who suffered a serious sunburn during their youth are twice as likely to develop melanoma later in life.

How is skin cancer treated?

Dermatologists use a variety of methods to remove skin cancers. Skin cancer can be treated with surgery, an electric needle, by freezing (cryosurgery) or with a highly specialized procedure known as Mohs micrographic surgery. Mohs surgery is one of the most

advanced methods used to remove cancerous skin, with minimal loss of surrounding healthy tissue and little risk of leaving cancerous tissue behind. Other skin cancer treatment methods include radiation therapy and chemotherapy. Your doctor will recommend the treatment method that's best for you depending on the size of the tumor, its location and the type of cancer.

Researchers are working on immunological treatments for malignant melanoma. A vaccine has been developed that consists of the patient's own cancer cells modified with the chemical DNP. DNP changes the melanoma cells so that the body recognizes them as foreign and produces an immune response against them. Although the vaccine is still experimental, promising results have been seen in patients with melanoma that has spread to lymph nodes. Administering the vaccine following lymph node surgery has been shown to increase the chance of cure, compared with surgery alone.

How can skin cancer be prevented?

The best and most effective defensive measure against skin cancer is to reduce your exposure to the sun. Although skin cancer is most likely to appear in adulthood, sun damage is cumulative and begins in childhood, so the effects of the sun may be severe by the time a person reaches young adulthood. Less than 10 years ago, for instance, it was unusual to find skin cancer in a person under 50 years old. Today, however, dermatologists are diagnosing skin cancer in adults in their 20s. This may be due, in part, to the amount of time people have spent outdoors in recent decades, basking in the sun or not using the right amount of sun protection.

Because the sun can harm your skin and your looks year-round, doctors now recommend

continued on next page

continued from previous page

protecting your skin by applying a sunscreen daily, not just during the summer months. Whenever you go outside – to run errands, to walk the dog, to wash the car – always wear a sunscreen on exposed skin and choose a product with a sun protective factor (SPF) of at least 15. The higher the number, the greater protection from ultraviolet rays, although there's no need to buy a product with an SPF larger than 30. Also, look for sunscreens labeled "broad spectrum." They block out ultraviolet B (UVB) rays, the light rays responsible for sunburns and skin cancer, as well as ultraviolet A (UVA) rays, which cause wrinkled, sagging, leathery skin. For maximum protection, apply sunscreen to dry skin 15 to 30 minutes before going outdoors. Reapply sunscreen after swimming or perspiring.

In addition to limiting your sun exposure time, doctors also recommend wearing protective clothing, such as wide-brimmed hats and long sleeves, when spending time in the sun. Ultraviolet rays are present during daylight hours but avoid midday sun especially, because UVB rays are strongest between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. Examine your entire body once a month for the early warning signs of cancer and see a dermatologist immediately if you notice any changes in the color, shape, size or texture of moles or other growths. It's also a smart idea to have a dermatologist check your skin once a year.

What are clinical trials?

When laboratory research shows that a new treatment method has promise, patients with cancer have the opportunity to receive the treatment in clinical trials or protocols.

By participating in a clinical trial you may have the first chance to benefit from improved treatment methods and the opportunity to make an important contribution to medical science.

To find out more about current clinical trials that you may be able to participate in, ask your doctor or call 215-955-1661 or 1-800-JEFF-NOW.

*For an appointment with a Jefferson physician, more information or health information and education programs, please call **1-800-JEFF-NOW** (1-800-533-3669) or visit our Web site at **www.JeffersonHospital.org***

Jefferson also offers a number of cancer support and education programs as well as a Buddy Program in which survivors of cancer provide support and encouragement to patients who are newly diagnosed and an active cancer advocacy group. You'll find information on the Jefferson Web site about these programs or by calling 1-800-JEFF-NOW.

Speech- or hearing-impaired callers can access JEFF NOW® by calling 1-800-654-5984.