

Skin Cancer

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Am I at risk for skin cancer?

The number of Americans with skin cancer continues to rise at an alarming rate. There are a number of risk factors for skin cancer. These include:

- Fair skin, light hair, and light eyes
- A tendency to sunburn easily, or a history of multiple sunburns in your past
- A history of skin cancer in yourself or in a family member (especially melanoma)
- Many moles (more than 100)
- Moles or freckles that are irregular in shape or color
- A history of dysplastic nevi (by previous biopsy)
- A history of pre-cancerous growths (actinic keratoses which are frozen or “burned off”)
- Having received an organ transplant

What does skin cancer look like?

There are three main types of skin cancer:

Basal cell carcinoma (BCC)

Squamous cell carcinoma (SCC)

Malignant melanoma

BCC is the most common type of cancer in America. It tends to appear in areas that have received the most sun exposure, such as the arms and face. Although it is a cancer, it rarely spreads to internal organs. It may look like a shiny growth or a non-healing sore.

SCC also tends to appear in areas that have received excessive sun exposure. It can be more dangerous, especially in areas such as the lips and ears. It may look like a crusty growth, or a non-healing sore.

Melanoma is the most dangerous skin cancer. In men, the most common area is the back. In women, the most common area is the legs. However, melanoma may occur in any area of the body, even in areas that have never seen sunlight, such as the buttocks, the nails, or the soles of the feet. If caught early, it is usually curable, but if caught in a late stage, it may spread to internal organs and be life-threatening. It usually looks like a mole or freckle, especially one that has changed in some way, such as in size, shape, or color.

What can I do to reduce my risk?

Early detection and Sun protection

What is early detection?

Any skin cancer that is caught at an earlier stage or a smaller size will be easier to treat. In the case of basal cell skin cancer, this means a smaller scar. In the case of melanoma, detection in an early stage may be life-saving.

If you are at risk, your dermatologist may recommend that you come into the office for a head-to-toe skin exam every 6 or 12 months. At home, you need to continue self-examination of the skin. This means searching all of the skin surfaces once a month for any new or changing moles, freckles, or growths. You will need a partner or mirror to help you search areas such as the scalp, the back, the soles, and the buttocks.

What is sun protection?

Sun protection is more than just using sunblock, and using sunblock means more than just looking at the SPF factor.

Sun protection means limiting the amount of UV radiation that reaches your skin.

Use caution when outdoors between the hours of 10AM and 4PM, the times when the sun's rays are at their strongest.

Use a wide-brimmed hat and clothing with a thick weave. (A baseball hat does not protect the ears. A thin white cotton t-shirt still allows UV radiation to penetrate to the skin.)

UV radiation can and does penetrate on a cloudy day and through window glass, and is reflected by water, concrete, and snow, making it harder to avoid.

Tanning beds emit UV radiation, and are NOT a safe alternative to sun.

Self-tanning lotions or sprays (sunless tanning lotions) that dye the skin are considered safe to use, although they do not provide any sun protection.

What kind of sunblock should I use?

Sunblock must be used correctly to provide sun protection. Apply liberally and often. Most people do not use enough to provide the SPF protection listed on the label, so make sure you use a thick layer. If used in water or while sweating, reapply every 2 hours. Makeup or moisturizer with sunblock only helps if you use enough.

When choosing a sunblock, look for one that provides "broad-spectrum" protection. This means coverage against both UVB and UVA radiation, since both types may lead to skin cancer. The SPF factor refers only to protection against UVB radiation (which causes sunburns). Broad-spectrum sunblocks provide protection against sunburn and sun damage.

The best broad-spectrum protection is provided by ingredients that physically block the sun's rays from reaching your skin, such as zinc oxide, micronized zinc oxide, or titanium dioxide.