

SUN AND SKIN

SKIN CANCER DOESN'T JUST GROW WHERE THE SUN SHINES

Beach season is right around the corner, and while you may not be thinking of sunscreens when it's still nippy outside, you probably should. Even in the winter, the sun's rays can damage your skin and lead to skin cancer.

"There's a misconception about an overcast or wintry day," says Leslie Coker, a dermatologist with Associates in Dermatology Inc in Hampton. "Any day, whether you see your shadow or not, exposes you to harmful rays. And contrary to recent claims, regular sunscreen use is beneficial. It provides protection from ultraviolet radiation, which is well documented as a cause of skin cancer."

She encourages her patients to add a sunscreen to their morning regimen: get up, brush your teeth, wash your face and put on a sunscreen. Covering the face, ears, neck and hands is especially important as those areas are regularly exposed to the sun. "Dermatologists often see more damage on the left face, ear, or hand because this is the window side for the driver and the UV rays pass through window glass." Truckers and commuters beware!

Some people come in concerned that a certain spot is cancer only to be given good and bad news: the spot they were worried about is fine – but another one needs a biopsy. "There are skin cancers that can resemble ring worm or eczema but fortunately there are also a lot of "ugly" dark spots that are nothing more than decorations" she says.

There are three main types of skin cancer: basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma, and malignant melanoma. Basal and squamous cell carcinomas are more common but slower growing. "They can be sneaky" says Coker. "They can start as a tiny pimple or skin col-



ored bump or even as a small scaly patch."

Most people worry about skin cancer on parts of the body that receive a lot of sun, and that's fine, says Coker, because most basal cell and squamous cell carcinomas follow that rule. But those aren't the only places where skin cancers grow, especially deadly melanomas.

Melanoma is the most deadly of the three. In a matter of months it may metastasize, or spread, throughout the body. There is no cure for a melanoma at this late stage. What's even more disturbing is that the incidence of melanoma is on the rise. "In the 1980's I'd see approximately one melanoma a month. Today the average is roughly one a week" remarks William L. Coker, Jr, the founding dermatologist at Associates in Dermatology, and Leslie R. Coker's father. "Early detection is crucial" he adds, "as surgical removal before it becomes invasive usually leads to a good prognosis."

The best protection from melanoma is sun protection and regular skin surveillance.

What should one look for?

Start by looking for the "ugly duckling". For instance, an irregular brown-black bump that stands out amongst a back full of freckles. It's a good idea to get a baseline skin

exam by a dermatologist when your in your 30's or even younger if you have a history of melanoma in your family, have a lot of irregular moles or have had many sunburns as a child.

"Anyone who has a family history of melanoma should get a baseline exam," Coker warns. "The dermatologist will educate them on what they do have, what they need to be looking for and how often they should be rechecked".

People should be examining their skin every month to monitor changes in their moles or new onset lesions.

"It's like performing a tick check each month. Be aware of your moles. Scan all areas of your body. If something catches your eye or if something doesn't seem quite right then you should have it checked." Dr. Coker stresses the importance of knowing the history of a mole. "A patient may present with a very benign looking mole but if they tell me it had only recently appeared then I am going to be more suspicious. Similarly, if there is a slightly irregular mole but the patient says 'it's looked like that for 10 years,' I have less reason to worry."

Visit www.aiderm.com to see examples of the skin cancers mentioned in the article.

SKIN PROTECTION TIPS:

- Find an SPF 30 or higher sunscreen that you like enough to wear every day. Use it regularly, rain or shine, summer or winter.
- Examine your skin every month looking for changes.
- Get a baseline exam from a dermatologist.
- If you are going to be outside for a while, consider wearing a wide brim hat and sun protective clothing.

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