



The 2016-2018
Women's Health Issues Topic:

Skin Cancer

The underlying truths about a killer tan

By Sharon C. Brown, MS, RPh

SKIN CANCER IS the most commonly diagnosed cancer in the United States¹. Most skin cancers are preventable with the primary risk factor for skin cancer being exposure to ultraviolet (UV) light. The most common source of UV light is sunlight and tanning beds. The obvious solution to reducing the incidence of skin cancer would be to reduce exposure to sunlight and indoor tanning beds. But that solution is not always so simple.

Risk Factors for Skin Cancer

Exposure to UV light early in life, especially frequent sunburns, increases the risk of developing skin cancer later in life. Men are two to three times more likely than women to develop some form of skin cancer. Also at increased risk are people with a fair complexion, blonde or red hair, and blue or green eyes. Other risk factors include a large presence of moles, positive family history, long-term skin inflammation and smoking².

Types of Skin Cancer

Basal cell carcinoma is the most common form of skin cancer. It is composed of abnormal uncontrolled growths or lesions that arise in the skin's basal cells. This type of skin cancer is usually caused by the combination of cumulative and intense occasional sun exposure, such as sunburns. Basal cell carcinoma almost never spreads and rarely reaches life-threatening stages. However, it can lead to significant disfiguration if not treated early. More than 4 million cases are diagnosed in the U.S. each year².

Squamous cell carcinoma develops from uncontrolled growth of abnormal cells arising in the squamous cells which comprise most of the skin's upper layers (epidermis). This type of cancer is more likely to result in disfiguration than basal cell carcinoma and can become deadly if allowed to grow. Caused by exposure to UV light, squamous cell carcinoma usually occurs on parts of the body that are naturally exposed to the sun and that tend to show signs of aging, such as

the face and neck. More than 1 million cases are diagnosed in the U.S. each year².

Melanoma is the most dangerous form of skin cancer. It develops when unrepaired DNA damage to skin cells triggers mutations that lead the skin cells to multiply rapidly and to form malignant tumors. The tumors originate in the pigment producing cells in the basal layer of the epidermis. Melanoma resembles moles and are usually black or brown but they can be lighter in color as well. This cancer is usually treatable if diagnosed and treated early. But once it spreads, it is very difficult to cure. Melanoma makes up less than 1% of skin cancer cases but accounts for the vast majority of skin cancer-related deaths².

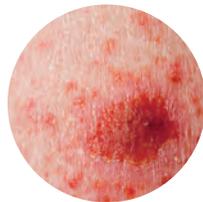
Fighting the Good Fight

Simple prevention strategies could drastically reduce the incidences of skin cancer. In 2014, the Surgeon General issued a Call to Action to Prevent Skin Cancer³. Identifying skin cancer as a major public health problem, the Surgeon General called on leaders in the business, healthcare and education sectors, as well as community, faith-based and non-profit organizations, to partner with individuals and families to reduce the risk of skin cancer in the U.S. population.

This call to action promotes five strategies to support skin cancer prevention in the general public³:

1. *Increase opportunities for sun protection in outdoor settings.*
2. *Educate individuals so they can make informed decisions regarding healthy choices about UV light exposure.*
3. *Promote policies that advance the national goal of preventing skin cancer.*
4. *Reduce harm resulting from indoor tanning.*
5. *Strengthen research, surveillance, monitoring and evaluation related to skin cancer prevention.*

TYPES OF SKIN CANCER



Basal cell carcinoma



Melanoma



Squamous cell carcinoma

While the Surgeon General issues warnings and encourages reasonable prevention strategies, the multi-billion dollar tanning bed industry claims their products are safe and actually provide benefits, such as boosting mood, reducing cellulitis, looking younger and increasing Vitamin D absorption (the one fact that has been proven).

Safe Tan Myth Falls Flat

Formed in 2012, the American Suntanning Association (ASA) has initiated public relations and lobbying activities to promote tanning and to reverse what it calls “misinformation” related to the risks of UV light exposure. Much of their efforts focus on the benefits of Vitamin D and highlights the sunlamps that are specially designed for Vitamin D production. This industry promotes the idea of a “safe tan” and what they call associated health benefits.

Despite these efforts, the International Agency for Research on Cancer categorized UV-emitting tanning devices as “carcinogenic to humans”—the highest cancer risk category also given to cigarettes and asbestos. According to one report, people who start using tanning beds or sunlamps before the age of 30 increase their risk of developing melanoma by 75 percent².

And regarding the benefits of Vitamin D? Experts suggest supplements as the most appropriate option for boosting Vitamin D absorption.

Love the Skin You’re In

As healthcare professionals, we often spend long hours indoors and can’t wait to feel the sun on our faces every chance we get. The feeling of looking like you’ve been “kissed by the sun” is generally a good one. But we do need to be smart about the decisions we make today that will impact our health and the health of our families in the future. Some common sense actions even sun-lovers can live with include:

1. *Limit exposure to the sun. Plan outdoor activities for early morning or late afternoon. Stay out for short periods of time. Use an effective sunscreen and reapply often.*
2. *Wear protective clothing, such as clothes, hats and sunglasses designed to protect from UV light.*
3. *Use skin care products with SPF every day. Regular daily use of products with an SPF of at least 15 can reduce the risk of some cancers by 40 to 50%.*
4. *Learn to love your natural skin tone. For a sun-kissed look, try using a light make-up base or well-tested self-tanning product. You will be able to love your skin a lot longer!*

Take time during this biennium to learn more about skin cancer and the behaviors that can increase the risk of developing skin cancer. And watch for more information in the next *Blue & Gold Triangle* about screening for skin cancer and treatment modalities. **AKΣ**

1. Division of Cancer Prevention and Control (<http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/dccp/abott/>)

2. <http://www.skincancer.org/skin-cancer-information/skin-cancer-facts>

3. <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/prevent-skin-cancer/>