



Arm Yourself with Knowledge to Help Prevent and ID Skin Cancers

discussing difficult topics

More people are diagnosed with skin cancer than any other cancer combined in the US. In fact, those who have had five or more sunburns are two times more likely to be diagnosed with melanoma and 90% of those diagnosed with nonmelanoma skin cancer developed it from exposure to ultraviolet rays (UV rays). These damning figures demonstrate how important it is to protect our skin from sun damage.

Dr. Jason M. Rizzo, M.D., a board-certified dermatologist and skin cancer surgeon, said “It’s the ultraviolet radiation in the sun that damages the DNA in your skin cells and causes cancer. We know it’s cumulative and adds up over time so the more sun, the more risk”.

Risk Factors

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Protection (CDC), most skin cancers are caused by overexposure to UV rays from the sun, tanning beds, and sunlamps^[1]. Continuous exposure to these harsh rays begins to change the texture of skin and it starts to show signs of aging. Ultimately, these exposures can potentially lead to cancer.

Some people are predisposed to skin cancer based on their genetics. Around 10% of people who have skin cancer have an immediate family member who also has had the disease. Additionally, people who have fairer skin, freckles, and red or blond hair, are at higher risk of developing skin cancer. However, those who have a darker skin tone are not immune to sun damage. “The natural pigment in some skin tones serves as protection against the damage for the ultraviolet radiation of the sun...but patients of color tend to get skin cancer in areas with less pigment,” said Dr. Rizzo.

Interestingly, not all skin cancer develops due to UV damage and/or genetics, Dr. Rizzo said. Certain environmental factors such as exposure to chemical carcinogens and pollutants can also cause skin cancer. People who work in jobs that require the handling of chemicals and ultraviolet radiation are most at risk. These occupations include welding, farming, coal mining, painting, nail technicians, and airline pilots.

Types

The most common types of skin cancer are:

- Nonmelanoma skin cancer
 - Basal cell carcinoma
 - Squamous cell carcinoma of the skin
- Melanoma

How to Self-Examine

Skin cancer cells can develop on any part of the body that can be exposed to the sun such as your scalp, face, lips, ears, neck, hands, and legs^[2]. However, skin cancer can also develop on skin areas that are not commonly exposed to light such as the palms, soles, underneath fingernails, and in the groin area.

If you are unsure whether a lesion in your skin is cancerous, use the A, B, C, D, and E approach^[3] to skin cancer detection.

A

A is for Asymmetry

One half of the spot is unlike the other half in shape

B

B is for Border

The spot has an irregular or poorly defined border

C

C is for Color

The spot has various color shades

D

D is for Diameter

Typically, melanomas are greater than 6 millimeters (the size of a pencil eraser)

E

E is for Evolving

The spot looks different from other spots on your body or is changing in size, shape, or color

Diagnosis

If you are concerned about a spot or lesion on your body, you should consult a board-certified dermatologist, Dr. Rizzo said. If your insurance requires a referral to a specialist, you can first meet with your primary care physician to obtain the referral. A dermatologist will start with a consultation and look at the skin lesion with a dermatoscope to determine if it's an area of risk.

If the doctor is worried, in the office they will perform a skin biopsy where they numb the affected area and remove a piece of skin for lab analysis. Results from a biopsy can take several days to weeks, but the outcome of the test results determines what type of treatment is needed.

Treatments

To treat high-risk skin cancers, dermatologists will most likely recommend Mohs surgery, where surgeons remove the cancer roots and keep the scarring of healthy skin cells as minimal as possible. It is typically done outpatient and when completed, reduces the need for other treatments in the future or eliminates the cancer altogether, Dr. Rizzo said.

Smaller and low-risk areas can be treated without surgery. Other treatments include radiation therapy, chemotherapy, immunotherapy, chemical peels, or medications like retinoids. However, every case is different so doctors will decide which treatment will be most effective in getting rid of the cancer.

Taking Preventative Measures

Everyone can reduce the risk of skin cancer by wearing sunscreen of at least 30 SPF, opting for spray tans instead of tanning beds, and wearing protective clothing. Each of these options can lower the risk of UV rays from penetrating the layers of your skin and damaging the cells.

Additionally, people who are at risk of skin cancer can take preventative measures by getting a full-body skin check once a year with a dermatologist to see if there are any potentially cancerous spots. If you have a family history of skin cancer, you may want to consider getting a screening every six months or so.

By detecting cancerous skin cells early, patients are more likely to have better outcomes, both medically and aesthetically.

Please reach out if you'd like to discuss this or other challenging wellness topics that may be impacting your well-being.



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^[1] What is skin cancer? | CDC. (n.d.). https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/skin/basic_info/what-is-skin-cancer.htm

^[2] Skin cancer - Symptoms and causes - Mayo Clinic. (2022, December 6). Mayo Clinic. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/skin-cancer/symptoms-causes/syc-20377605>

^[3] What to look for: ABCDEs of melanoma. (n.d.). <https://www.aad.org/public/diseases/skin-cancer/find/at-risk/abcdes>

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