



Searles Wellness

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Skin cancer and the sun

Should I worry about getting skin cancer from getting a sun tan?

Most people love the warmth of the sun on a beautiful summer day. Surprising in a survey complete by the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD) 90% of the respondents identified sun damage as causing wrinkles. The risk of developing skin cancer was identified only by 58% of the respondents. Ultraviolet light is a known carcinogen especially at high exposure rates.

In our highly appearance oriented society tanned skin is often desired and “looks sexier” despite potential associated risks of skin cancer. Tanned skin is a visible sign of sun damage and sun damage significantly increases a person’s risk of developing skin cancer. One in five Americans will develop skin cancer in his or her lifetime. Fortunately, skin cancer is highly curable when caught and treated before it spreads, so early detection is essential.

Awareness of sun damage and the lesser known signs and symptoms and consequences of over exposure to the sun include actinic keratosis (AK). This is a common precancerous skin condition that is often confused with sun spots or age spots. AK can progress to squamous cell cancer the second most common type of skin cancer. Basal cell cancer is the most common skin cancer is also potentiated by sun damage. Most squamous cell cancers and basal cell cancers will be on the face, nose, ears, upper torso, the tops of the hands and forearms. Of course, these are the areas which are consistently getting the most sun exposures. The least common, but most serious skin cancer is melanoma. For further information about skin cancers go to www.Skincancer.org. Many treatment options are available for AK lesions utilizing cryo therapy, topical chemotherapy- 5FU, immune response modifier, lasers, photo dynamic therapy (PDT) and surgery. Prevention is key to prevent sun damage in the first place. Yes, wrinkles are caused by sun damage also.

The best sunscreen is a broad brimmed hat and a shirt. Special SPF fabrics have been developed to enhance sun protection also. Additionally, seeking shady picnic locations and avoiding peak sun exposure hours in the afternoon sun is encouraged. But when you can’t avoid exposing your skin to the sun, try to use sunscreens with broad spectrum (UVA and UVB) protection with fewer hazardous chemicals to penetrate the skin. Many safe products contain zinc or titanium minerals that absorb, scatter or reflect UV light. Consider keeping a tube of sun screen in your car, to apply while facing strong sun exposure while driving home from work in the

evening. A generous reapplication of your chosen sun screen every couple of hours is also recommended. Natural chemical free products are available through: Alba Botanica, Aubrey Organics, Aveeno, Blue Lizard, Copper tone, Neutrogena to name a few. Different products maybe more suitable for different skin types, different climates, acne prone skin, infants, and water exposures. Always spot test a new product on a limited non facial area before using for the first time. Unfortunately allergic or irritant reactions even to ‘natural’ products can occur.

Since sun exposure is responsible for vitamin D production in the skin, wearing sunscreen can decrease the skin's production of vitamin D, but alternative and safer options are available to obtain your vitamin D. Most individuals who properly and consistently wear sunscreen or use other UV protective measures should supplement vitamin D with enriched foods and/or vitamin supplements. Additionally living in the Pacific Northwest further increases the likelihood of being vitamin D deficient due to our latitude.

What isn't skin cancer?

It is worthwhile having your skin examined, when you have your routine medical checkup. Additionally if you have a family history of skin cancers, or if you have specific skin concerns a dermatology examination is recommended. Often people living alone don't see areas on their backs easily and failing eye sight can make missing early skin cancers common. Generally, as we age our skin will manifest more benign skin changes (non-cancer) some of which can be worrisome in appearance.

Seborrheic keratoses can look like melanoma, freckles, warts, moles, actinic keratoses, and other skin cancer. Their color could be whitish to black. They differ, though, from these other skin growths in that seborrheic keratoses have a waxy, “pasted-on-the-skin” look. Others may resemble a barnacle sticking to a ship. These growths can occur anywhere on the body and do not turn into cancer.

Skin tags are an elongation of the normal skin which occurs with chronic friction, and like seborrheic keratoses have no risk of turning into cancer. Routine skin exams often identify small benign oil gland growths that look like basal cell cancers on the face, and adult freckling that may look similar to melanoma in situ. When in doubt biopsies are recommended to rule out any serious problems.

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