

Common Concerns by Chris Petersen



Skin Cancer: Saving Your Skin From Sun Damage

Why is the sun so bad for my skin?

The sun's rays, which are called ultraviolet A and ultraviolet B rays (UVA and UVB rays) damage your skin. This leads to early wrinkles, skin cancer and other skin problems.

Being in the sun often over time, even if you don't burn, can lead to skin cancer. A tan is the body's desperate attempt to protect itself from the sun's harmful rays.

Are tanning booths safer?

No, they are not advised. Tanning booths use ultraviolet rays. Makers of the booths may claim that they use "harmless" UVA rays. But both UVA and UVB rays cause skin damage. While UVA rays take longer than UVB rays to damage the skin, they go deeper into the skin than UVB rays. If you have questions on tanning booths, consult your medical provider.

Where is skin cancer most likely to occur?

Most skin cancers occur on parts of the body that are repeatedly exposed to the sun. These areas include the head, neck, face, tips of the ears, hands, forearms, shoulders, back, chests of men, and the back and lower legs of women.

What are the risk factors for skin cancer?

A number of things may put you at higher risk of having skin cancer some day:

Use sunscreens with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 15 or more. Put the sunscreen everywhere the sun's rays might touch you, including your ears, the back of your neck and bald areas of your scalp. Put more on every hour if you're sweating or swimming.

- Having fair skin, red or blond hair
- Having light-colored eyes
- Sunburning easily
- Having many moles, freckles or birthmarks
- Working or playing outside
- Being in the sun a lot as a child
- Having had a serious sunburn
- Having family members with skin cancer
- Tanning in the sun or with a sunlamp

What does a normal mole look like?

A normal mole is solid tan, brown, dark brown or flesh colored. Its edges are well-defined. It's usually smaller than 1/4 inch in diameter and has a round or oval shape. It should be flat or dome-like.

How can I tell if my mole isn't normal?

The main thing to look for is any change in a mole that you have or the appearance of a new mole. Most normal moles appear by age 30. Any moles that appear after age:30 should be watched carefully and brought to the attention of your family doctor.

(Continued on back of this page)

Signs of skin, cancer ABCDE rule

A for asymmetry: A mole that, when divided in half, doesn't look the same on both sides

B for border: A mole with edges that are blurry or jagged

C for color: Changes in the color of a mole, including darkening, spread of color, loss of color, or the appearance of multiple colors such as blue; red; white, pink, purple or gray

D for diameter: A mole larger than 1/4 inch in diameter

E for elevation: A mole that is raised above the skin and has an uneven surface

Other signs include

- A mole that bleeds
- A fast growing mole
- A scaly or crusted growth on the skin
- A sore that won't heal
- A mole that itches

How can I prevent skin cancer?

The key is to avoid being in the sun or using sunlamps. If you're going to be in the sun for any length of time, wear clothes made from tight-woven cloth so the sun's rays can't get through to your skin, and stay in the shade when you can. Wear a wide-brimmed hat to protect your face, neck and ears.

Remember that clouds and water won't protect you--60% to 80% of the sun's rays can get through clouds and can reach swimmers at least one foot below the surface of the water. The sun's rays can also reflect off of water, snow and white sand.

Tips on preventing skin cancer

- Avoid the sun, especially from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., when the sun's rays are the strongest.
- Don't use tanning, booth or sunlamps.
- Wear protective clothing and, hats.
- Check your skin yourself every month for signs of skin cancer
- If you see an area on your skin that looks unusual, ask your family doctor about it.

Should I use sunscreen?

If you can't protect yourself by staying out of the sun or wearing the right kind of clothing, use sunscreen to help protect you. But don't think that you're completely safe from the sun just because you're wearing sunscreen.

How should sunscreen be used?

Use sunscreens with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 15 or more. Put the sunscreen everywhere the sun's rays might touch you, including your ears, the back of your neck and bald areas of your scalp. Put more on every hour if you're sweating or swimming.

Watch the next issue of Robyn's Table Chat on "What's the best way to do a skin self-examination."

Christopher E. Petersen P.A.-C
Department of Family Medicine
Galesville Clinic- Franciscan Skemp Healthcare
608-582-2286

Franciscan Skemp
Mayo Health System
Galesville Clinic