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Patient Education:

Preventing Skin Cancer, Adult

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Preventing Skin Cancer, Adult

Skin cancer is the most common type of cancer. There are three main types:

- Squamous cell.
- Basal cell.
- Melanoma.

Squamous cell and basal cell skin cancer are the most common types. Melanoma is the most dangerous type. Most skin cancers are caused by skin damage from exposure to ultraviolet (UV) light. UV light comes from the sun and from artificial tanning beds. Suntans and sunburns result from exposure to UV light.

Skin cancer occurs in people of all skin colors. Skin cancer occurs most often in older people, but it is usually the result of damage done earlier in life. The tans and sunburns you get at any age can lead to skin cancer in the future. To help prevent this, you can take steps to protect yourself.

What actions can I take to protect myself from skin cancer?

Many people like to get a tan, especially in the summer or when on vacation. However, tan or burned skin is a sign of skin damage and increases your risk for skin cancer. To lower your risk:

Avoid exposure to UV light

- Try to stay out of the sun between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. whenever possible. This is when the sun is at its strongest. Seek the shade during this time.
- Remember that you can also be exposed to UV rays on cloudy or hazy days. Sun exposure can be risky year-round, not just in the summer.
- **Do not** use a sunlamp, tanning bed, or tanning booth to get a tan. If you really want a tan, use an artificial tanning lotion.
- Avoid getting sunburned. Sunburns are more common on bright sunny days, especially when you are in areas where the sun is reflected off water or snow.



Use sunscreen and protective clothing

- Always use sunscreen—either a cream, lotion, or spray—when you are out in the sun. Keep sunscreen handy, such as in your gym bag or in your car, so that you will have it when you need it.
- Use sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 30 or higher.
- Make sure your sunscreen protects you from UVA and UVB light. It should also be water-resistant.
- Use enough sunscreen to cover all exposed areas of your skin. Put it on 15–30 minutes before you go out. Reapply sunscreen every 2 hours or anytime you come out of the water.
- When you are out in the sun, wear a broad-brimmed hat, clothing that covers your arms and legs, and wraparound sunglasses.
- Protect your lips by wearing a lip balm or lip stick with an SPF of at least 30.



Check your skin for changes

- Check your skin often from head to toe to look for any changes in the size, color, or shape of any moles or freckles. Check for any new moles or moles that bleed or become itchy. See your health care provider if you notice any changes.
- Ask your health care provider about a total skin check. Ask if it should be part of your yearly physical or if you need to see a skin specialist (*dermatologist*).

Take other preventive measures

- Avoid exposure to harmful chemicals, such as arsenic. You can do this by:
 - Having your home's water tested for arsenic and other chemicals.
 - Taking protective measures to avoid exposure to chemicals at work.
- **Do not** use any products that contain nicotine or tobacco. These products include cigarettes, chewing tobacco, and vaping devices, such as e-cigarettes. If you need help quitting, ask your health care provider.
- Keep your immune system healthy. Take steps, such as:
 - Staying up to date on all vaccines, including the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine.
 - Eating at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables every day.



Why are these changes important?

About 1 of every 5 people will get skin cancer. The best way to reduce your risk is to avoid skin damage from UV light. If you have teenagers in your house, they should know that just five bad sunburns as a teen could double their risk of skin cancer in the future. If you have younger children, always make sure to protect their skin from the sun.

These changes can help reduce your risk of skin cancer. They will also provide other health benefits, such as:

- Protecting your skin from the sun can help prevent painful sunburns, sun poisoning, and other skin damage and blemishes. This is especially important if:
 - You have pale white skin, freckles, and red hair.
 - You burn easily.
- Avoiding exposure to harmful chemicals can help prevent damage to other tissues in your body, such as your lungs, and prevent other types of cancer.
- Avoiding smoking tobacco can reduce your risk for other types of cancer and other health problems.
- Eating a healthy diet is good for your overall health.

What can happen if changes are not made?

If you do not make these changes, you will be at higher risk for skin cancer. If you develop skin cancer, the treatments could result in lost time from work and changes in your appearance from scars. The most dangerous type of skin cancer, melanoma, can be deadly if not found early.

Where to find support

For more support, talk to your health care provider or dermatologist.

Where to find more information

Learn more about skin cancer from:

- The Skin Cancer Foundation: www.skincancer.org/prevention
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov/cancer/skin/
- The American Academy of Dermatology: www.aad.org

Summary

- Skin cancer is the most common type of cancer.
- Melanoma skin cancer can be deadly if not found early.
- Sunburns and tanning increase your risk for skin cancer.
- Protecting your skin from UV light is the best way to prevent skin cancer.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.

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