

Lifelines

from the National Cancer Institute



African Americans Can Get Skin Cancer: This Summer, Protect Yourself

By the National Cancer Institute

As the summer heats up, Americans will begin spending more time outside, grilling, playing outdoor sports, doing yard work, going to the beach--enjoying the sunshine. But there may be risk for something much more serious than a tan. African Americans may not be as careful with their sun safety habits as their white counterparts, believing that the melanin in their darker skin is protecting them from skin cancer. While skin cancer is less common in people with darker skin, people of color are at some risk for the disease. Unfortunately, African Americans are often diagnosed at an advanced stage, when there is less chance for a cure. Although the number of African Americans affected is small, it's important to know that proper caution may help you and your friends and family prevent the disease. In this *Lifelines* column, the National Cancer Institute (NCI) addresses myths about skin cancer and discusses how African Americans can protect their skin.

Myth: There is only one type of skin cancer.

Facts: There are several types of skin cancer. The two most common types are non-melanoma skin cancer (basal cell cancer and squamous cell cancer) and melanoma. Basal cell skin cancer grows slowly. It usually occurs on areas of the skin that have been in the sun, and it is most common on the face. Basal cell cancer rarely spreads to other parts of the body. Squamous cell skin cancer also occurs on parts of the skin that have been in the sun, but it also may be in places that are not in the sun. Squamous cell cancer sometimes spreads to lymph nodes and organs inside the body. Melanoma occurs much less frequently than basal cell and squamous cell cancer, but it is the most serious and deadly form of skin cancer.

Among African Americans, squamous cell cancer is the most common form of skin cancer. Although squamous cell cancer is generally curable, it may be more serious when it occurs in African Americans than when it appears in whites. And although melanoma is much less common in African Americans than in whites, when it does occur in African Americans it is particularly deadly. This disease usually begins as an abnormal mole. In whites, melanomas often develop on the trunk and legs, but in African Americans, melanomas are most often found under the nails, on the palms of hands, and on the soles of the feet.

Myth: The only risk factor for skin cancer is exposure to UV radiation (the sun)

Facts: Research has shown that several risk factors are associated with the development of skin cancer. For example, studies suggest that both exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation and the sensitivity of a person's skin to UV radiation are risk factors for skin cancer. UV radiation is the name for the invisible rays that are part of the energy that comes from the sun. But there are other risk factors, such as having burns or scars on the skin, a weakened immune system, previous exposure to radiation therapy, and chronic skin diseases like lupus.

Myth: I can't do anything to reduce my risk for skin cancer.

Facts: Protecting your skin and eyes from the sun is the single best way to reduce your risk of skin cancer. For example, seek shade or stay out of the midday sun between 10am and 4pm whenever you can. Use sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15, and reapply every 2 hours and after swimming or sweating. Wear a hat with a wide brim and sunglasses that absorb UV rays. Wear clothing that covers your skin to protect against the sun's UV rays, and use extra caution near water, snow, and sand, which reflect UV rays.

It is also important not to burn, to avoid tanning beds, and to be aware of any changes in your skin. Melanoma usually begins as an abnormal mole. For early detection, make sure to examine your skin once a month to look for any new growths or changes in existing lesions. If you identify a skin change or are concerned about your risk, talk to your doctor.

How can African Americans learn more about skin cancer?

You can visit the NCI Web site at www.cancer.gov. From the home page, choose "Melanoma" or "Skin Cancer" from the "Common Cancer Types" list or call 1-800-4-Cancer. Don't be caught off guard with a skin cancer diagnosis because you assumed it could not happen to you. Everyone has some risk of skin cancer. This summer and all year round, protect yourself and spread the word to your friends and family to do the same.

NCI leads the National Cancer Program and the NIH effort to dramatically reduce the burden of cancer and improve the lives of cancer patients and their families, through research into prevention and cancer biology, the development of new interventions, and the training and mentoring of new researchers. For more information about cancer, please visit the NCI Web site at www.cancer.gov or call NCI's Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237).