

Lifelines

from the National Cancer Institute



Enjoy the Sun with Caution -- Anyone Can Get Skin Cancer

by the National Cancer Institute

Some people live in communities where the weather is great for outdoor activities year-round. For others, the summer season is just a few months long. But no matter where you live, you need to know that spending time in the sun can be dangerous for people of all skin colors, including African Americans. Even if you do not have light skin, light-colored hair, and blue or green eyes, you are at risk for skin cancer. [Anyone can get skin cancer.](#)

Although skin cancer is less common among people with darker skin, it is often detected at later or advanced stages. In fact, data show that when African Americans and other minority Americans are diagnosed with melanoma, the most severe form of skin cancer, it is usually at a later stage, when the disease is harder to treat and less likely to be cured.

This later diagnosis occurs partly because many people—even doctors—had long assumed that the pigment melanin in darker skin could protect against skin cancer, which is not true. Although melanin does help prevent sunburns, the sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays can still damage skin.

A recent survey of skin cancer awareness (reported in the *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology* in 2013) among people who visited a New York dermatology clinic found that members of minority populations had a poorer understanding of the warning signs of melanoma than whites. In fact, nearly half of the white patients had undergone a total body skin examination, compared with just 5 percent of the members of minority communities.

What persons with darker skin need to know is that the sun isn't the only cause of skin cancer. That's why skin cancer may be found in places on your body that never see the sun. For example, you may be more likely to develop skin cancer if you come into contact with certain chemicals or poisons, have scars or skin ulcers, or use medicines, or develop medical conditions (such as HIV infection), that suppress the immune system. Although family history and genetics are risk factors for skin cancer in whites, there have not been enough genetic studies in people with darker skin to determine whether these are risk factors.

Posted June 2014

It is important to identify the signs and symptoms of skin cancer early

When skin cancer is found early, it can be treated more easily. A change on the skin is the most common sign of skin cancer. This may be any new mole or growth on the skin, a sore that doesn't heal, or a change in an old growth. Check the skin on all surfaces of your body, even in your mouth. Talk with your doctor if you see any changes on your skin that do not go away within a month.

There are steps you can take to protect yourself and prevent skin cancer

Avoid staying in the sun if you can—especially between 10 AM and 4 PM, when the sun's rays are strongest. If you work or play outside, you should wear clothes that cover your arms and legs, a hat that shades your face and ears, and sunglasses that filter out UV light to protect your eyes.

Use sunscreen that has a sun protection factor (SPF) of 30 or higher. You should use sunscreen products that are labeled "broad spectrum," which can filter out both UVA and UVB rays. Tanning beds, booths, and sunlamps also give off UV rays and should be avoided.

It doesn't matter whether you consider your skin light, dark, or somewhere in between—remember, anyone can get skin cancer. Start taking care of your skin today.

In 2011, the National Cancer Institute developed a brochure that contains the facts you need to know to protect yourself from skin cancer. You can order *Anyone Can Get Skin Cancer* at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237) or at <http://www.cancer.gov/anyone-can-get-skin-cancer>. view it on <http://www.cancer.gov//anyone-can-get-skin-cancer>). Share it with your friends and family, so that you can all try to avoid skin cancer and stay healthy.

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 m.cancer.gov from your mobile device) or call NCI's Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237). More articles and videos in the culturally relevant Lifelines series are available at www.cancer.gov/lifelines, including a [video](#) about skin cancer for people with darker skin.