

Lifelines



from the National Cancer Institute

Anyone Can Get Skin Cancer—Learn How to Protect the Skin You're In!

By the National Cancer Institute

You may have heard that people with light skin, light-colored hair, and blue or green eyes have a greater risk for developing skin cancer. But did you know that people with [darker skin are at risk](#) for skin cancer too? It doesn't matter whether you consider your skin light, dark, or somewhere in between—anyone can get skin cancer.

While 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.

This later diagnosis occurs partly because many people—even doctors—have long assumed that the pigment melanin in darker skin can protect against skin cancer. However, although melanin does help prevent sunburns, the sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays can still damage skin.

Also, 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. While family history and genetics are risk factors for skin cancer in Caucasian Americans, these have not been studied in people with darker skin.

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 out in the sun if you can, especially in the middle of the day, 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 15 or higher. You should use sunscreen products that are labeled "broad spectrum" that can filter both UVA and UVB rays. You should not use tanning beds, booths, or sunlamps, because these machines also give off UV rays.

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.

The National Cancer Institute has created 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 download a copy at <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/prevention/skin/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.