



Skin Cancer: Are you safe in the sun?

Skin cancer attacks more than one million Americans every year, and exposure to the sun causes over 90 percent of skin cancers in the United States.

Many people describe sun-tanned skin as a “healthy glow,” but it’s not exactly the truth. There is no such thing as a healthy tan.

Sun Damage

Any type of suntan is the result of sun damage caused by exposure to ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun. Other types of sun damage include wrinkles, age spots, freckles, tough or leathery skin, dilated blood vessels, sunburn and skin cancer.

The sun emits two types of UV radiation: UVA (which causes aging) and UVB (which causes burning). Both UVA and UVB rays are undetectable to a person sitting in the sun—you cannot feel them on your skin. Both types of rays are damaging on cloudy days as well as sunny days. In addition, both types of radiation can cause skin cancer.

Skin Cancer

People are most susceptible to skin cancer when they are exposed to sudden, short bursts of sunlight while in places where the sun is very strong, such as locations near the equator or at very high altitudes.

The following characteristics place people at an even higher risk of developing skin cancer:

- Having a large number of moles on the skin
- Being a redhead or blonde, and/or having blue eyes, fair skin and freckles
- Difficulty tanning and skin that is easily burned
- A family history of skin cancer
- Taking medication that increases sun sensitivity

Preventing Sun Damage

The easiest way to prevent skin damage and lessen your chances of getting skin cancer is to avoid getting sunburn. Here are a few tips to help keep you safe in the sun:

- Stay out of the sun between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. when it is strongest.
- Wear clothes with tightly woven fabric and a hat that shades your face, neck and ears.
- Wear sunglasses whenever you are outside to avoid developing cataracts and damaging your retinas.
- Use sunscreen that has at least 15 SPF every day, especially on your lips and the tips of your ears and nose.
- Avoid using tanning beds. Tanning beds give off radiation that is 10 to 15 times stronger than the sun.
- Protect children from sun damage. Most sun exposure occurs before age 18.

Avoiding excessive sun exposure and sunburn is the best way to protect yourself from sun damage and skin cancer. Routinely inspect your skin for any changes, and if you suspect that a spot on your skin is new, or has changed color or appearance, see a doctor.