

By Marsha Fink, M.D.



# Sun Safety: Prevention and Early Detection of Skin Cancer

As we enter into the warm summer months, visions of our beautiful beaches, the ocean's blue waves and fun in the sun flood the minds of many beach community residents. As an oncologist, I feel an ever-important calling during this time of year to remind everyone about the best ways to stay safe in the sun, schedule regular skin check-ups with a physician and to detect the warning signs of skin cancer as early as possible.

Skin cancer is the most common of all cancers, affecting an estimated one million people each year, according to the American Cancer Society. Although the damaging effects of the sun's rays can happen year-round, establishing a regular skin protection plan can lessen your risk. Avoiding the sun when ultraviolet rays are the strongest (usually between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.) is among the best ways to avoid harmful sun exposure. Also:

- **Wear Protective Clothing:** Cover up with clothing when you're out in the sun. Clothes made of compacted fabrics that can't be seen through when held up to light are best.
- **Wear Sunscreen:** A sunscreen with a skin protection factor (SPF) of 15 or higher is a good defender against the sun's UV rays. It should be applied about 20 minutes before going outside and should always be reapplied after swimming, drying off with a towel or sweating heavily. Ideal sunscreen products should protect against both UVA and UVB rays.
- **Wear a Hat:** Because your ears, neck and face tend to get the most exposure during full sunlight, a hat with a wide brim is your best bet.
- **Wear Sunglasses:** Your eyes need protection from the sun too. Sunglasses that wrap around the eyes and temples are the best eyewear to protect against the various angles of UV rays.

## What everyone should know about skin cancer

For many of us, the level of information and research about the harmful effects of the sun's UV rays simply wasn't around when we were kids and young adults. While protection from the sun is the best safeguard against developing skin cancer, knowing its early warning signs can prove to be just as important.

The most serious of the skin cancer types is called melanoma. Although it is less common than the other two types of skin cancer, if not detected and treated early enough, melanoma can become life-threatening.

Rest-assured, most melanomas can be found early on, successfully treated and cured. Recognizing changes in your skin and reporting them quickly to your doctor are critical steps in this process.

## Who is most likely to be diagnosed with melanoma?

- No one is entirely risk-free from getting melanoma.
- People with the highest risk are those who have a significant amount of moles, irregular moles or large moles.
- Those with close blood relatives who have had melanoma or those who have previously had it themselves.
- People with fair skin that burns and freckles easily, as well as those with naturally blond or red hair.
- People who live in places with intense, year-round sunshine.
- Older people have a greater risk of developing melanoma.

## The simple ABCD rule for melanoma warning signs:

- **Asymmetry**—one half of the spot does not match the other half.
- **Border irregularity**—unlike normal moles that are round or oval in shape, the borders of a melanoma may be uneven or notched.
- **Color**—Melanomas have several colors or an irregular pattern of colors and sometimes, they can be almost colorless.
- **Diameter**—Regular moles are generally less than one-quarter of an inch across. Melanomas may be one-eighth to one quarter of an inch across but are often larger.

It bears repeating that the best weapon against melanoma is detecting it and removing it early. Examining yourself in the mirror once a month can help you become familiar with your skin, making it easier to detect even the smallest of changes as early as possible. If you have a friend or family member who can help you with the examination of difficult areas, by all means, ask them for help. If you have many freckles or moles and a history of sun exposure, you should schedule an examination with a medical professional, specifically a dermatologist. **HB**

*Marsha Fink, M.D., is a medical oncologist at Orange Coast Memorial Medical Center. For a referral to Dr. Fink or any Orange Coast Memorial physician, please call 1-800-MEMORIAL (1-800-636-6742).*