

July: Skin Cancer ABCs

July is known for summer fun activities, i.e. swimming, biking, tennis, gardening, and yard work, etc. It's great because we can be outside and enjoy the beautiful sunshine! The sun does do a lot of good regarding our mental state - an increased mood for one. On the other hand, we have to be careful what that sun is doing to our skin! Hopefully, this article will be informative; so be safe and get outside and enjoy the beautiful weather!

Know Your Skin Cancer ABCs

You may hate the way your moles look, but have you ever thought that they might be indicators of skin cancer? Some scary facts on this deadly disease: It's the most common form of cancer in the United States. It's diagnosed more regularly than all other cancers COMBINED. Even worse, skin cancer can be preventable. That's right - many of us are, in essence, inviting it into our bodies with unsafe sun exposure and tanning. Become a skin cancer guru and learn more about the signs, treatment and prevention – it can potentially save your life. Plus: Test your know-how with our skin cancer quiz...

Let's begin with the basics of skin cancer. The three types of skin cancer are melanoma, basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma. The latter two are non-melanomas.

Melanoma begins in the melanocytes, cells which produce melanin, or the brown pigment in the skin. Melanoma tends to metastasize, or spread, more easily than the other forms of skin cancer, making it more deadly if not caught early on. Basal cell carcinoma grows slowly and rarely metastasizes, while squamous cell carcinoma usually stays in the epidermis but can metastasize. Unhealthy moles are often the best indicators of all three types of skin cancer. Most of us have some sort of brownish spots on our skin in the forms of birthmarks, freckles and moles, but the majority of these spots are normal and non-cancerous.

Learning the ABCs (and D) of skin cancer are crucial when it comes to detecting skin cancer at its earliest stages.

A – Asymmetry: If a mole is not round or symmetrical, or one half of the mole is not similar to the other half, it could be a sign of melanoma.

B – Border Irregularity: Cancerous moles have irregular borders that may be being uneven, ragged, notched, or blurred.

C – Color: The typical color of a mole is consistently brown throughout. A mole that has changed color over time or is varied in a shade of brown, tan and black may be cancerous. If melanoma has progressed, the mole may become red, blue or white.

D – Diameter: Cancerous moles can be more than six millimeters in diameter (about ¼ inch or the size of a pencil eraser).

Other mole variations that may indicate melanoma are: elevation in height from the skin

surface both horizontally or vertically; a change in feeling, like itchiness, tenderness or pain; and the tendency to bleed if scratched. Generally, people with moles on their body, especially a lot of moles, should frequently inspect them using the ABC (D) guide in order to detect melanomas as early as possible.

If you have a suspicious-looking mole, make an appointment immediately with a dermatologist for a biopsy. Fortunately, there are medications and surgery that can fight and kill skin cancer. Some are less invasive and drastic than others. They include:

Cryosurgery: Cancerous cells are frozen off and destroyed by the application of liquid nitrogen.

Excision: The cancerous tissue is removed during surgery, leaving only a scar behind. **Electrodessication and Curettage:** For small cancers, this procedure involves scraping the area with a curette, which may also leave a scar.

Chemotherapy: Cancerous cells are attacked and destroyed by the circulation of anti-cancer drugs throughout the bloodstream.

Radiation: Cancer is destroyed with X-ray type radiation.

Immunotherapy: Along with skin cancer surgery, some medications like Aldara and Interferon are used to help the body better fight the cancer.

Taking good care of your skin and being able to recognize the danger signs are key to skin cancer prevention. While you can't control the heredity factor (you're more likely to get melanoma if a family member has had it), you can control your exposure to the sun and tanning beds. Check out our article on the dangers of tanning for more information on safe sun exposure.

Simply by educating yourself on skin cancer signs, treatments and prevention, you're already taking a big step toward not becoming one of the scary statistics. Make a promise to yourself to be sun-smart and regularly examine your skin for any new growths or changes in your moles.

Are You Smart When It Comes to Skin Cancer? When it comes to the sun and your safety, are you current on your skin cancer knowledge or is ignorance bliss in favor of the perfect tan? Consider this: Skin cancer is diagnosed more often than all other cancers combined. Have we caught your attention now?

