

## SUN SAFETY IN THE NORTHWEST

By John L. Winfield, MD, PS, Bellevue Dermatology Clinic

**T**he Seattle area averages 226 cloudy days a year. With a gray blanket seemingly blocking out the sun for almost two-thirds of the year, it is understandable that many residents think it isn't necessary to use sunscreen every day. Though clouds do absorb a lot of sunlight, much of both the beneficial and harmful kinds of ultraviolet radiation in sunlight still reach the ground. Despite the cloud cover, applying sunscreen and other sun-protection behaviors are still important parts of a healthy lifestyle, even for Western Washington residents.

Protecting your skin helps avoid more than wrinkles. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, skin cancer is the most common type of cancer in the United States. And the incidence of skin cancer is increasing. Melanoma, the most serious type of skin cancer, has increased by about 4 percent each year for the past 30 years. In 2007, more than 1 million Americans were diagnosed with some form of skin cancer.

Many people living here in the Northwest and across the country are not taking adequate sun precautions. In a national survey of health behaviors, almost half the participants reported infrequent use of sun-protective clothing and infrequent use of sunscreen with a Sun Protection Factor (SPF) of 15 or higher. Taking these simple precautions will do a great deal to reduce your risk of skin cancer, as will avoiding the direct light of the midday sun when its damaging rays are strongest.

How does skin cancer occur? It starts in the top, protective layer of skin, your epidermis. This layer is made up of different types of skin cells, with newer cells continually being generated and pushing out, or sloughing off, older cells. Your skin's DNA controls this process of regeneration routinely unless the DNA is damaged by an external force like overexposure to the sun.

The ultraviolet rays from the sun or tanning beds, both UVA (long wave) and UVB (medium wave) rays, can damage your skin's DNA



and cause skin cells to become malignant. There are also other factors that explain a small number of skin cancers, such as heredity or exposure to certain chemicals.

Malignant cells can result in three different types of skin cancer: basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma and melanoma. Basal cell cancers are usually easy to treat if caught early, and occur most commonly on the areas of the skin that are frequently exposed to the sun, such as the face, ears, neck, scalp and shoulders. Squamous cell carcinomas can also be treated if caught early, but are more likely to spread than basal cell cancer. The most common finding of both basal cell and squamous cell carcinomas is a lesion that does not heal in a reasonable amount of time and may bleed easily after using a washcloth or towel. Melanoma is the most serious and the most likely form to cause skin cancer deaths. This type of skin cancer often occurs on the face or upper back and commonly appears dark, spotted, bumpy and irregular in shape.

The following A to E guide, adapted by the American Academy of Dermatology, is helpful to use when checking your skin for any sign of skin cancer:

- A** is for asymmetrical shape.
- B** is for irregular border.
- C** is for varied color. Look for dark and light shading, spots or uneven color.
- D** is for diameter. Your doctor should see growths larger than one-fourth inch.

**E** is for evolving. It's important to note any change in size, color or symptoms of a mole or skin growth.

If you notice any of these changes in your skin, check with your dermatologist or primary-care doctor immediately. In addition to identifying the early signs of skin cancer, there are many ways you can protect yourself and your family from the sun:

- Limit sun exposure during the peak hours of 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
- Wear sunscreen year-round. Select one with an SPF of at least 15. For the most protection, apply 20 to 30 minutes before sun exposure and reapply every two hours, especially after swimming or heavy sweating.
- Wear dark, tightly woven fabrics for more complete sun protection.
- Wear a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses.
- Avoid tanning beds and their dangerous UV rays.
- Check your skin regularly for any growths or changes in moles, freckles or birthmarks, and report any suspicious changes to your doctor.
- If you're over 40 or at risk for skin cancer, see your doctor annually for a complete skin exam.

There is some controversy about sun exposure being beneficial for vitamin D production but the American Academy of Dermatology maintains that it is best to obtain vitamin D from diet and supplements and to continue taking all sun-protection measures. To protect your skin, remember to use the basic sun-safe precautions on both sunny and cloudy days so that you can enjoy our great Northwest wisely.

### HELPFUL WEB SITES

[www.overlakehospital.org](http://www.overlakehospital.org)  
[www.skincancer.org](http://www.skincancer.org)