



FROM THE OFFICE OF DR.

# Preventing skin cancer

Skin cancer is the most common form of cancer in the United States, and the incidence is increasing. In 2000, an estimated one million Americans will develop a skin cancer, and about 9,000 will die from it. Although skin cancer usually can be cured when detected early, it is better to prevent it from occurring in the first place.

## What is skin cancer?

Skin cancer is the uncontrolled growth of abnormal skin cells. Healthy cells grow in an orderly way, but cancer cells grow and divide rapidly and haphazardly. This rapid growth results in tumors. There are three types of skin cancer: basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma, and malignant melanoma. Basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma make up 95% of all skin cancers. Malignant melanoma, made up of pigment cells called melanocytes, is the most serious form of skin cancer. It has the potential to kill, and causes about 75% of all skin cancer deaths.

## What causes skin cancer?

The number one cause of skin cancer is exposure to sunlight, which contains ultraviolet (UV) radiation. Cumulative sun exposure—exposure that occurs over many years—generally causes basal cell and squamous cell carcinoma. Severe sunburns that occur in the teen years can cause malignant melanoma later in life.

## How can I prevent skin cancer?

The best way to protect yourself from skin cancer is to minimize sun exposure and avoid sunburns.

- Avoid direct sun exposure during peak UV radiation (between 10:30 a.m. and 3:30 p.m.).
- Apply a lip balm and sunscreen daily that has an SPF (sun protection factor) of 15 or higher 30 minutes before going outside. Reapply the sunscreen every few hours thereafter.
- Wear a wide-brimmed hat to protect your face and ears.
- Wear long-sleeved shirts and long pants to protect your arms and legs.
- Wear sunglasses that offer UV protection.
- Avoid tanning beds; UV light from tanning beds is just as harmful as (or perhaps even more harmful than) UV light from the sun.
- Make an appointment to see your dermatologist so that existing growths can be checked for signs of cancer. Early detection of skin cancer is critical because the earlier it is caught, the better the chances are that it can be cured. Then, perform a self-exam every month thereafter. Check your whole body from head (back of scalp) to toe using full-length and hand-held mirrors. If you notice any changes, new growths, or a sore that won't heal, see your dermatologist.

## How parents can protect their children

As a parent, be a good role model and foster skin cancer prevention habits in your child. This is especially important because it is estimated that 80% of lifetime sun exposure occurs before the age of 18.

For maximum protection, keep children out of the midday sun and make sure they wear a wide-brimmed hat and sunscreen. Sunscreens that contain titanium dioxide or zinc oxide are safest for children under 6 months of age.



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