

PROTECT YOURSELF FROM THE SUN THIS SUMMER: FACTS ABOUT SKIN CANCER

Skin cancer by the numbers

- 68,000: Total non-melanoma skin cancer cases in Canada, 2006*
- 4,500: Number of new melanoma cases in Canada, 2006
- 880: Number of deaths from melanoma in Canada, 2006

* The vast majority of non-melanoma cases in Canada are successfully treated without hospitalization.

Source: Canadian Cancer Society: Canadian Cancer Statistics

Sun Safety Tips

- Use sunscreens with SPF 15 or higher;
- Apply sunscreen 20 minutes before exposure and re-apply every two hours (if swimming, use a waterproof lotion);
- Wear a wide-brimmed hat;
- Wear sunglasses;
- Keep babies under one year of age out of direct sunlight (using covered strollers, umbrellas or shade);
- Teach children good sun safety habits and how to seek shade during peak afternoon sun hours;
- Protect your child with loose-fitting clothing (that covers most of their bodies). Children at most risk are fair-skinned, usually burn instead of tanning, have blond or red hair, freckles or many moles.

What is Skin Cancer?

There are three types of Skin Cancer:

Melanoma

This is the least common but most serious form of skin cancer. It usually starts as a flat brown spot that looks like a freckle. Edges are irregular and the whole spot is often asymmetrical with two or more colours (grey, red and brown mixtures). Commonly found on the upper back in men and calf or lower back in women.

Non-Melanoma

Basal Cell Carcinoma: Usually occurs on a sun-exposed area and begins as a raised, translucent blister-like bump. It grows larger and eventually becomes crusted and may be clear, flesh-coloured or pigmented.

Squamous Cell Carcinoma: Usually develops because of severe sun damage in which a patient has multiple “pre-malignant” lesions, usually pink or brown. They are more scaly and, if picked off, will form again.

Ultraviolet Radiation

Ultraviolet light works in different ways to cause skin cancer. Each time skin is exposed to the sun and becomes tanned or burned, damage is done to individual cells and to DNA. Some cells die and some repair themselves by getting rid of the damaged DNA. Cells that cannot repair themselves eventually become defective. Ultraviolet rays lower the body’s immune system, and this makes it difficult to destroy defective cells. Defective cells that are not destroyed slowly grow and produce a tumour

There are Three Types of UV Rays:

UVA rays:

While not as powerful as UVB, they penetrate more deeply into the skin and are responsible for contributing to wrinkling of the skin. UVA is prevalent in tanning parlours where tanning devices can emit UVA rays at between two and five times the intensity found in natural sunlight.

UVB rays:

Shorter but stronger than UVA, UVB rays primarily affect the skin's outer layers and are thought to be the primary cause of sunburn, skin aging and skin cancer. UVB rays tend to be more intense during the summer months and at higher altitudes. Repeated exposure to UVB can cause skin cancer and alter the body's immune system.

UVC rays:

These are the strongest and most dangerous rays. However, little attention is given to UVC rays because they are normally filtered out by the ozone layer.

Indoor tanning: As noted above, tanning beds and sun lamps can release harmful UVA rays. The Canadian Cancer Society says indoor tanning has been linked to skin cancer. It also notes that the World Health Organization recommends that people under the age of 18 should not use tanning beds or sunlamps. For more information, visit www.cancer.ca and search for indoor tanning.

For other skin cancer related questions, please call Calgary health link at 403-943-LINK(5465) or visit www.calgaryhealthregion.ca.