

Skin Cancer

Truett Smith, MPAS, PA-C

With the weather warming and the days getting longer, summer is quickly approaching. With all the benefits of being outdoors, there are certain risks.

More than 1 million cases of skin cancer are diagnosed in the United States each year and skin cancer is the most common type of all cancers. It destroys and replaces normal skin cells and can, in some cases spread to other parts of the body. Most skin cancers start in the outermost layer of skin called the epidermis.

The three main types of skin cancer are called basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma, and melanoma. Basal cell carcinoma is the most common type of skin cancer accounting for 80% of nonmelanoma. It occurs mostly on the sun-exposed areas of skin in otherwise normal fair-skinned individuals beginning in their 20's and 30's. Basal cell carcinomas generally grow slowly and are usually not life threatening. Squamous cell carcinoma usually occurs on exposed parts in fair-skinned people who sunburn easily and tan poorly. It may arise from pre-malignant lesions called actinic keratoses. Squamous cell carcinoma does sometimes spread or metastasize to other parts of the body. These lesions sometimes originate from the lip, oral cavity or tongue. Melanoma occurs in the pigment-producing cells of the skin called the melanocytes. The cells become abnormal and aggressively invade the surrounding tissues. They frequently spread or metastasize through the blood or the lymphatic system to other organs and bones. In 2002, approximately 53,600 people were diagnosed with melanoma and approximately 7,400 people died with the disease.

Skin cancer appears as a change in the skin, such as a growth, a color change, or an irritation or sore that does not heal. Skin cancer usually affects the head, neck, back, chest, or shoulders. It is diagnosed by physical examination of the skin. If a skin cancer is expected, usually a sampling of the skin, also called a biopsy, is obtained. A pathologist then examines the biopsy and a diagnosis is made. Skin cancers are usually removed by excising them from the normal skin. The pathologist can tell if the entire lesion has been removed by examination of the biopsy. Melanomas are placed in special category due to their risk of metastasis. They are classified based on thickness, depth, ulceration, and possible spread of the lesion.

Skin cancer is caused most often by overexposure to the sun and its ultraviolet (UV) rays. Overexposure includes occasional intense sunlight exposure during childhood that causes severe sunburn and blistering; extensive sunlight exposure over many years; and artificial sources of UV radiation, such as tanning beds or sunlamps.

Your risk of developing skin cancer is increased if you have light skin color; freckle easily; have frequent or severe sunburns; and live near the equator. Other risk factors include an inability to tan and a family history of skin cancer.

Skin cancer is best prevented by avoiding exposure to the sun's UV rays or rays from artificial sources, such as tanning beds or sunlamps. It is important to use a sunscreen of SPF30 or above that protects from both UVA and UVB rays. These sunscreens should be used everyday, not just on days that you go to the pool or the beach. Damage to the skin cells is a cumulative effect that increases the risk throughout your lifetime.

If you suspect skin cancer or just see changes to your skin that you are unsure of, it is best to follow up with your primary care provider or dermatologist. It is important not to wait as early intervention may save your life.