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HEALTHY LIVING

Skin cancer awareness

May is National Skin Cancer Awareness Month. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, melanoma is responsible for 75% of all skin cancer deaths nationwide, and one American dies from the disease almost every hour.

What is Skin Cancer?

Skin cancer is caused when skin cells grow out of control. The cells replicate and invade healthy tissue and continue to spread causing harm to the body.

Dr. Murali Murty, radiation oncologist at the Arizona Center for Cancer Care in Deer Valley says, "The most common type of skin cancer, by far, is basal cell carcinoma. And not just in sunny Arizona — nationwide. I see it every day and it has a very low risk of spreading. However, it can be locally destructive — especially to the cartilage of ears and noses. Bad cases can result in disfigurement.

"The second type of skin cancer is squamous cell carcinoma. This type of cancer can spread rapidly. If found on the head or neck, it can quickly spread through the lymph nodes or nerves," says Dr. Murty.

"The third, and more severe case of skin cancer, is malignant melanoma, which is the second most common form of cancer in adolescents and young adults. In fact, Arizona residents born today are 25 times more likely to develop melanoma than those born less than 100 years ago," says Dr. Murty.

Causes of Skin Cancer

"In skin cancer patients, the abnormal skin cells are often due to the sun's ultraviolet light or tanning beds," says Dr. Scott Tannehill of the Arizona Center for Cancer Care in Deer Valley. "Given the primary cause of the disease — sunshine — it is no surprise that more people are diagnosed with one of three forms of skin cancer than with breast, prostate, lung and colon cancer combined."

"Despite popular opinion, tanning is neither a sign of good health nor should it be considered the height of beauty," says Tannehill. "In fact, just one severe sunburn in a lifetime more than doubles the chance of developing melanoma, the most dangerous form of skin cancer."

Dr. Luci Chen of the Arizona Center for Cancer Care in Deer Valley says, "There is a litany of falsities and half-truths about sun health. They include:

- Tanning beds are safe — they aren't.
- Getting a "base" tan prevents sun damage — it doesn't.
- A few sunburns can't hurt — they do.
- Skin cancer isn't really dangerous — it is.

When to get checked

Dr. Greg Bode, Deer Valley Family Practice and the John C. Lincoln Health Network, says, "Anyone who notices a lesion on the skin that is changing size or not healing, and anyone who notices pink, itchy, bleeding, crusting, oozing, or irregular shaped moles or lesions should have them checked immediately. In addition, anyone who has multiple moles on their body should be checked once per year. Plus people with blonde or light hair, blue-eyes, fair skin and freckles seem to be at the highest risk and should take the most precautions and get checked regularly."

Prevention

"The greatest amount of damage to our skin generally occurs when we are young, so kids and young adults (age 10 — 24) should be extremely careful." Dr. Bode says.

He suggests everyone follow these tips to help them stay skin cancer free:

- Stay out of the sun from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
- Never getting a sunburn, use SPF level 30 or higher sunscreen
- Wear and reapply sunscreen every hour to two hours, and especially every after swimming
- Never using a tanning bed
- Wearing long sleeves outside, even at 120 degrees, and use a wide brimmed hat to shade as much of your body as possible

How is Skin Cancer Treated?

"Surgery is the principle treatment," says Dr. Tannehill. "Radiation therapy, which can eradicate the cancer while leaving the normal tissue, is also highly-effective in fighting skin cancer, just as it is with breast, prostate and dozens of other cancers. Radiation therapy may offer an advantage over surgery for some skin cancers."

There are some disadvantages to surgery says Dr. Tannehill. "Some skin cancers are located in cosmetically-delicate areas such as the tip of the nose, or the lip, or on other areas of the face. For these cancers, surgery may result in undesirable cosmetic effects. Also, surgery is not always well tolerated by the infirm elderly, or by patients with advanced dementia or certain medical illnesses. For such patients and their families, the prospect of surgery and the subsequent wound care may be daunting. Radiation therapy may be an effective alternative for these patients."



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