



Feature Column

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Keeping Your Hometown Healthy

Take Care of Your Skin and It Will Take Care of You

June 2 – 8, 2002

Did you know that your skin is the body's largest organ, weighing about six pounds? It protects us from light, heat, injury and infection. The skin regulates body temperature and stores water, fat and Vitamin D. Many of us do not think about how our skin protects us. More importantly, many people do not think about how to protect their skin.

One million people will be diagnosed with skin cancer this year, according to the National Cancer Institute. In 1999 alone, 91 Arkansans died of skin cancer. Thanks to better methods of diagnosis and treatment, the vast majority of skin cancers are curable - if found early and treated promptly. However, diagnosis and treatment shouldn't be your first line of defense. What is most important is that you reduce your exposure to the sun, as well as other forms of ultraviolet (UV) exposure, thus lowering your risk for skin cancer.

The sun's UV rays can damage your skin and lead to skin cancer. Fortunately, there are many ways to prevent this damage to your skin. Whenever possible, avoid the midday sun when the UV rays are the strongest. Remember trees, beach umbrellas and tents are all good sources of shade.

Sunscreen is your friend when you are outside, not just at the pool or the beach. Wear sunscreen even on cloudy days. Use sunscreen that will protect you against both UVA and UVB rays that

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has a sun protection factor (SPF) of a least 15. Follow the manufacturer's instructions and reapply throughout the day.

Not all sun protection comes in a bottle. When outdoors, consider wearing a hat. Research shows that 80 percent of skin cancers occur on the head and neck, so wearing a wide-brimmed hat is a great way to shade your face, ears, scalp and neck from the sun's rays. Then, use sunscreen on areas that your hat doesn't cover.

When enjoying your favorite outdoor activities, remember to shade your skin and eyes. Extra clothing like a shirt, a beach cover-up and pants are all good choices. Grabbing a pair of sunglasses is more important than just looking good - it is also the best way to protect your eyes from harmful UV rays. Not all sunglasses block those rays, however.

Although anyone can get skin cancer, individuals with certain risk factors are particularly vulnerable. Some risk factors for skin cancer are:

- Light skin color
- History of sunburns early in life
- Family history of skin cancer
- Certain types and a large number of moles
- Freckles as an indicator of sun sensitivity and sun damage
- Chronic exposure to the sun

There are three major types of skin cancer:

- Basal cell carcinoma is the most common and the least dangerous. There may be a change in the skin, such as a growth or a sore that won't heal, or there may be a small lump that is smooth and shiny looking.

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- Squamous cell carcinomas are less common, but more serious. These scaly patches or wartlike growths can spread cancer to other parts of the body.
- Malignant melanomas comprise about five percent of all skin cancers, but account for about 75 percent of all skin cancer deaths. This type of cancer can spread quickly to other parts of the body. The warning signs are moles that change texture or shape or darken in color; moles that bleed, itch or become sore; or new moles that don't look normal.

The major cause of basal and squamous cell skin cancers is cumulative, intense long-term exposure to UV light, from the sun or from tanning booths. Malignant melanomas are related to intense, intermittent exposure. Sunburn has long been believed to be associated with a higher risk of melanoma, but researchers say this isn't true. People who develop melanoma are genetically susceptible to skin cancer.

People with fair skin are at highest risk, especially redheads, but anyone, no matter how dark, can get skin cancer. Increased melanin in the skin of darker people absorbs some of the damaging rays, protecting some of the underlying skin. Although African-Americans are 80 percent less likely to get skin cancer than Caucasians, they are at a higher risk for the dangerous malignant melanoma.

Whether you are at the beach, on the ski slopes or just walking from the parking lot to the mall, you can keep your skin protected and lower your risk for skin cancer. Remember, slip on a shirt, slop on some sunscreen and slap on a hat.

For those of you who cannot go without getting some color, try over-the-counter tanning products. A tan from a bottle is much safer than one obtained from sun bathing or using a tanning bed.

For more information call the American Cancer Society, 1-800-ACS-2345, the Cancer Information Service, 1-800-4-CANCER, or the Arkansas Cancer Research Center at UAMS, 1-501-686-5578.

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