

# Cancer is Skin Deep

We make many promises with the unfolding of a new year. We promise to lose weight, exercise more, reduce the stress, and do whatever it takes to feel good about ourselves. Many times such promises falter because they usually require more commitment than we are willing to give.

Let's face it, there just isn't any fun in kicking old habits. The real resolution lies in seeing how long we can hold out.

So what if there was a resolution that required developing a habit rather than giving one up? One that required a little shopping (oh yeah, now that's an easy task to handle) for a few accessories, and being aware of the time of day. This resolution poses not only a lot of style, but also a hedge against developing the most common form of cancer.

The vow to make this year is to become a devotee to sun screen, to shop for hats and clothes that offer protection, and to try to avoid the sun between 11am and 2:30pm. These simple habits will go a long way in protecting your skin against the ravages of cancer.

Now while many of us are inclined to say that'll never happen to me, the simple truth is that, every year, over 1 million Americans are diagnosed with some form of skin cancer. Sadly, this statistic also includes the young.

Skin cancer is not only the most common form, it is also the most preventable form of cancer. Most incidences are caused by excessive exposure to the sun.

There are three major forms of skin cancer. Basal Cell (BCC) is the most common form. It is slow growing and develops in the epidermis (the outermost layer of skin). Squamous Cell (SCC) develops in the keratin, which protects the epidermis layer. Together, these two skin cancers account for the bulk of cases.

Melanoma, meaning "black tumor," is the most serious form of skin cancer. It is the most malignant of all cancers, and can spread to nearly every organ and tissue in the body; the brain and spinal cord are two likely areas it will spread.

Almost 60,000 will be diagnosed with melanoma this year; 8000 are projected to die from this disease. Its cause is often intermittent exposure to intense sunlight. This means that the weekend sun burner is a very susceptible candidate for this disease.

Other risk factors for skin cancer include: fair skin (less melanin); living in high altitudes; having dysplastic nevi (atypical moles); outdoor employment; immune system related diseases; and genetic skin disorder.

Industrial and household exposure to coal tar, arsenic insecticides, nitrogen mustard ointment, viral carcinogens, ionizing radiation (x-rays), chronic irritation and inflammation also poses a high risk.

The best precaution is to be smart about your exposure to the sun. Wear at least a SPF 15 sun screen and protective clothing.

Remember that there is no such thing as a safe tan. Even tanning booths will greatly increase your chances of developing skin cancer. A tan represents irreparable damage to the skin, and a "healthy tan" is anything but.

Be aware of any changes to your skin, and seek attention early if anything unusual is discovered.

Some of the signs or symptoms to watch for are: moles, marks, or sores that change in size, shape or color. Basal and squamous cell cancers can appear as pale, waxlike, pearly nodules, or as red, scaly, sharply outlined patches. Melanomas start out as small mole-like growths that increase in size and change shape.

The American Cancer Society has developed the 'ABCD Rule.' A is for asymmetry one half of the mole does not match the other half; B is for border irregularity edges are ragged, notched or blurred; C is for color pigmentation is not uniform, variable degrees of tan, brown, or black; and D is for diameter greater than 6mm.

If skin cancer is diagnosed, treatments will depend upon the type, location and degree of development. Excluding melanomas, which present different challenges, most skin cancers are curable.

The most common therapies used are: surgical removal of the tumors (about 90% are surgically treated); cryosurgery, which uses liquid nitrogen to freeze the tissue; radiation, which has a 90-95% cure rate and is desirable for older patients who are not able to tolerate surgery; curettage with or without electrodissection (C&E), whereby layers are cut away; and laser surgery.

The best step to take in preventing skin cancer is to make it a life long commitment. Parents should strive to make childhood sunburns a thing of the past, and be sure to apply sun screen to their children before going outside to play. It is never too early or too late to take care of the body's largest organ, the skin.