

Get Healthy with Your Benefits: Skin Cancer

VEBA online



The skin is the body's largest organ, and protects us from heat, sunlight, injuries, and infections. Skin also helps control body temperature and stores water, fat, and vitamin D. The two main layers of the skin are the epidermis (upper or outer layer) and the dermis (lower or inner layer). Skin cancer is a disease in which malignant (cancer) cells form in the tissues of the skin.

Skin cancer can occur anywhere on the body, but it is most common in skin that has been exposed to sunlight, such as the face, neck, hands, and arms.

There are many types of skin cancer. The most common types are nonmelanoma — these skin cancers rarely spread to other parts of the body.

Risk factors

Risk factors for basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma — common types of nonmelanoma cancer — include the following:

- Exposure to a lot of natural or artificial sunlight
- Fair complexion (blond or red hair, fair skin, green or blue eyes, history of freckling)
- Having scars or burns on the skin
- Exposure to arsenic
- Chronic skin inflammation or skin ulcers
- Radiation treatment
- Taking immunosuppressive drugs.

Some, but not all, changes in the skin are a sign of nonmelanoma skin cancer, so you should consult a doctor if you see changes in your skin.

online resources

For more information, U.S. residents may call the National Cancer Institute's (NCI's) Cancer Information Service toll-free at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237) Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. A trained Cancer Information Specialist is available to answer your questions.

The NCI Web site at www.nci.nih.gov provides online access to information on cancer, clinical trials, and other Web sites and organizations that offer support and resources for cancer patients and their families.

Prevention

To help prevent skin cancer, follow these tips:

- Always use a sunscreen (for body and lips) with an SPF rating of 15 or higher
- Reapply sunscreen every two to three hours — more often if you've been swimming or sweating a lot
- Apply sunscreen all over your body, including the tops of your ears, the back of your neck, your face, and the tops of your feet
- Always wear sunglasses with UV protection in the bright sun
- Take frequent breaks from the sun by going indoors or moving into the shade
- Wear a wide-brimmed hat.

Signs of cancer

Possible signs of nonmelanoma skin cancer include the following:

- A sore that does not heal
- Areas of the skin that are
 - small, raised, smooth, shiny, and waxy
 - small, raised, and red or reddish-brown
 - flat, rough, red or brown, and scaly
 - scaly, bleeding, or crusty
 - similar to a scar and firm.

Go to <http://www.aad.org/public/Parentskids/Kids/Connection/KCcancerABCDs.htm> (American Academy of Dermatology) for descriptions on the three most common types of skin cancer and to learn how to perform a skin exam.

Melanoma

Melanoma, although much less common than nonmelanoma cancers, is more likely to invade nearby tissues and spread throughout the body. It's a good idea to examine yourself regularly if melanoma runs in your family or if you are fair-skinned. You can get melanoma even if you are never in the sun. When examining yourself, look for dark moles that may have an uneven edge and may change as time passes.