

## Sun Smarts

## Summer's sunny days demand a more rigorous skincare regimen

by angelle bergeron

**Living in a sportsman's paradise** can have deadly consequences. The year-round climate adds up to an increasing risk of skin cancer for Louisianians.

"The more days of sunshine you have, the higher rates of melanoma you have," says Ann Fernandez, cancer program coordinator for Slidell Memorial Hospital Cancer Center.

The problem is greater, generally speaking, in the south than the north, says Dr. Emil Koretzky, a dermatologist with practices in Chalmette, Harahan and New Orleans. "The sun is more intense here, but we also spend a lot of time in the sun, more than up north, for recreational purposes and for work."

According to the American Cancer Society, skin cancer is the most common type of cancer and more than 1 million people are diagnosed with skin cancer each year in the United States. That's more than prostate, breast, lung, colon, uterine, ovarian and pancreatic cancer combined.

"When we talk about skin cancer, there are three types that most affect the population," Fernandez says. "Two are usually not fatal and are easily curable — basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma, which are usually on your face or in an area exposed to a lot of sun. The doctor will cut them out and that's the last you will hear about it."

These non-melanomas rarely spread elsewhere in the body and are less likely than melanomas to be fatal.

Melanomas, named for melanocytes — the cells that gives skin its brown pigment — are less common than other skin cancers but far more serious and more likely to spread to other parts of the body. "If left untreated or if found at a later stage, melanoma will go into the lymph nodes and travel throughout the body," says Fernandez. "We have treatments for melanoma but none have made a huge impact in curing the disease."

Melanoma will account for about 59,600 cases of skin cancer in 2005 and about 7,800 of the 10,600 deaths due to skin cancer each year.

Avoiding sun exposure and getting screened periodically are the easiest ways to detect and prevent skin cancer. Since skin cancer may not become evident immediately or be particularly painful like other cancers, people tend not to take it seriously.

"I always tell people if you're getting a tan,



### UGLY TRUTHS ABOUT MELANOMA

- Melanoma is in epidemic growth, with a 3 percent rise in cases per year.
- There are more new cases of melanoma each year than HIV/AIDS.
- More than 53,000 new melanoma cases and 7,800 deaths are reported yearly.
- An individual's melanoma risk was one in 1,500 in 1935; one in 600 in 1960; one in 150 in 1985; and one in 74 in 2000.
- Melanoma is the fastest-growing cancer in the United States and worldwide. It is the most common cancer in young adults ages 20 to 30.
- For women age 25 to 30, melanoma is the primary cause of cancer death. For women age 30 to 35, melanoma is the second-leading cause of cancer death following breast cancer.

Source — The Melanoma Research Foundation

## Life Lines

you're damaging your skin," Dr. Koretsky says. "The tan may melt away, but the damage never goes away and accumulates with time."

Tanning is a result of the skin trying to account for damage from the sun, he says. The darker look is a result of the pigmented cells making more pigment in the process of trying to repair themselves.

For those who argue about the sun's healthful benefits, Dr. Koretsky says, "People in their incidental activities get enough sunlight to take care of their vitamin D needs. You don't need the extra sun."

In this age of instant gratification, it's difficult enough convincing adults of sun exposure's long-term, detrimental effects but getting the message

### A MOLE IS A MOLE, IS A MOLE ... OR IS IT?

The American Cancer Society recommends annual screening by a dermatologist, but if you have suspicious moles or are in a high-risk group, you should self-screen on a monthly basis, says Ann Fernandez, cancer program coordinator for the Slidell Memorial Hospital Cancer Center. Those at high risk have:

- Fair skin, usually red headed or blond, although dark-skinned people may get melanomas, too
- 50 or more moles
- A family history of melanoma
- A weakened immune system
- Suffered a severe, blistering sunburn before age 18.

Fernandez encourages people to check themselves for changes in moles after bathing or showering. "Look at the front and sides of the body and visualize the harder to see areas with mirrors," she says. Beauty moles will be circular and of a consistent color. "We like them to be nice and round like Cindy Crawford's," Fernandez says. However, suspicious moles may be characterized using the ABCDs.

- Asymmetry: Half of the mole or freckle doesn't match the other half.
- Border: A cancerous mole or growth has a ragged, notched or irregular border.
- Color: The color is uneven, possibly with shades of black, brown and tan mixed together.
- Diameter: There is usually a change in size; it will start to increase if malignant and will usually be larger than the eraser of a pencil.

An E should be added to this checklist, says Dr. Emil Koretzky, dermatologist. "E is for evolving. Any changes in the mole as it evolves," he says.

Although he advises everyone to receive periodic skin checks by a dermatologist, Dr. Koretzky also encourages patients to have their eyes checked regularly by an ophthalmologist. "I had a classmate who didn't wear glasses, so he never went to the eye doctor," Koretzky says. "He died of melanoma that originated in his eye."

Dr. Koretzky also advises periodic dental screenings for moles inside the mouth (not sun-related) and, for women, a gynecologist for vaginal moles.

through to teenagers is a real challenge, says Tammy Swindle, health educator for the Cancer Association of Greater New Orleans. As part of a state mandate, all high-school juniors are required to receive instruction

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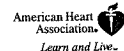
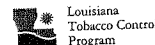
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in breast cancer awareness, Swindle says. During those educational programs, she also talks about lung and skin cancer.

"The majority of skin cancers are evident when you're older but many are from tanning or sunburn as a young child," Swindle says. "For teenagers, everything is immediate." If they don't suffer the consequences of their actions immediately, the threat isn't real to them, she says. "They say if it won't happen for 50 or 60 years, technology will take care of it by then. They don't realize melanomas are life-threatening and they could have problems in their 20s."

Teenagers seem to possess an even more emphatic "it won't happen to me" attitude than adults, especially females. The number of young women afflicted with melanoma is rising due to their increased use of tanning beds, Swindle says.

"Students say they want their tans for the prom or the summer and they think tanning beds are safe," she says. "I've had them ask me, 'Why would they be charging for tanning beds if they weren't safe?' I tell them tobacco companies charge for cigarettes."

Dr. Koretzky abhors the false sense of security people derive from using tanning beds, which they believe safer than natural sunlight. "Tanning beds are

terrible," he says. "They are not good for the skin because they create the same type of damage."

Swindle encourages youths to seek doctors' advice if they notice anything abnormal on their skin. "I tell them if it crusts, oozes, bleeds or is discolored, go to your doctor," she says.

Education is the key to prevention, Dr. Koretzky says. "I tell people they need to put on 15 SPF or higher sunscreen, 30 minutes before they go out. Reapply every hour or two or if they get wet or sweaty — whether it's cloudy or there is shade — especially from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.," he says. "Watch out for areas that reflect light — sand, water, cement — and wear a good hat with no holes and clothing that doesn't let the sun go through."

Children 6 months or younger should not be in the sun. "If they have to be out, don't use sunscreen but make sure they wear the right kind of clothing," he says. "There are special companies that make sun-protective clothing."

Using appropriate sun protection is a matter of changing behavior, Dr. Koretzky says. "It's never too late to start. All we can do is try to disseminate the information over and over and tell parents to use the sunscreen so kids can emulate them and it will be natural."\*



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