

Dermatology

Watch that spot!

Information leaflet for patients

Skin Cancer – The Facts

- It is the most common cancer in the country
- Over the years the incidents continue to rise
- Most treatments are curative and usually involve surgery
- Treatment is improving all the time

There are three main types of skin cancer:

- Basal cell carcinoma
- Squamous cell carcinoma
- Malignant melanoma

These types are placed into two main groups of skin cancer:

- Malignant melanoma
- Non-melanoma skin cancer

Malignant melanoma is the least common type of skin cancer, but is the most serious form. It affects the pigment producing cells (melanocytes) found in the skin and can appear as a new or changing mole. Malignant melanoma has the potential to spread to other sites or organs within the body. Malignant melanoma is curable if treated early, but more difficult to cure if spread has occurred.



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Non-melanoma skin cancers are far more common. Basal cell carcinomas and squamous cell carcinoma frequently appear on sun exposed skin after many years of exposure.

Symptoms and diagnosis

Early detection and treatment are the key to successful treatment, especially for melanoma. Any of several skin changes may signal a skin cancer and should be reported. These include:

- Any change in the size, shape, colour or texture of a mole or other dark pigmented area
- Any mole that begins to itch or becomes tender
- The development of a new mole or other growth that spontaneously bleeds
- A skin ulcer that does not heal
- A black spot under a toenail or fingernail that extends beneath the cuticle.

To confirm a diagnosis a biopsy may be performed; this means removing a small piece of skin to send away and have examined under a microscope for the presence of cancer cells.

What causes skin cancer?

Sunshine is the main cause of all of the skin cancers.

Ultra Violet (UV) rays contained in sunshine are known to be harmful and can cause skin cancers. The increase in skin cancers in Britain has been linked with the desire to have tan, repeated episodes of sunburn, fair skin types and genetic factors, such as the number of moles a person has.

Malignant melanoma is associated with frequent high intensity sun exposure. Whereas non-melanoma skin cancer is caused by long term exposure to low intensity sunshine. The amount of sun exposure during childhood and frequency of sunburn are now believed to increase the risk

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of developing skin cancer in adult life. Therefore it is most important to protect all children from intense sunshine.

Hats, T-shirts and sun screens are recommended at home, at school and on holiday. This includes British holidays when the sun can be very intense and cause burning if protective measures are not used.

Regular use of sun beds also increases your chances of developing skin cancer.

Sun protection and sunscreens

Protecting your skin from the sun is simple and doesn't need to be expensive.

Remember to:

- Stay out of the sun between 11am and 3pm
- Avoid burning;
- Cover up with tightly woven clothing, a wide brimmed hat and sunglasses when in the sun.

Sunscreens also offer protection but should only be used in combination with other methods. A sunscreen is any product applied to the skin to protect it from the sun.

Sunscreens may contain physical barriers, chemical absorbers or both. Physical barriers in sunscreens reflect the sun's harmful ultraviolet (UV) radiation away from the body. Chemical absorbers soak up the UV radiation reducing the amount of UV that reaches the skin. A sunscreen's Sun Protection Factor (SPF) is a measure of how much radiation it allows through.

What does SPF mean?

SPF stands for Sun Protection Factor and is a measure of how much a sunscreen protects your skin from burning in the sun. The higher the SPF, the greater the protection.

All sunscreens sold in this country carry an SPF rating on the front of the bottle. The rating may range from 2 -30 or even higher.

A sunscreen's SPF is measured by timing how long skin covered with sunscreen takes to burn when compared with unprotected skin. So, if your unprotected skin would burn in 10 minutes in the midday sun, by using a sunscreen of SPF2, skin would burn in double this time, that is in 20 minutes. However, sunscreens should not be used to allow you to remain in the sun for longer – instead use them to give yourself greater protection.

How much sunscreen?

Most people apply sunscreens too thinly and generally end up with less protection than the SPF on the bottle suggests.

When using SPF remember:

- Apply it thickly and evenly over all exposed areas;
- Those parts of the body which are not usually exposed to the sun will tend to burn more easily;
- Pay particular attention to ears, neck, bald patches, hands and feet;
- Re-apply regularly, especially after swimming.

Don't forget to protect your eyes.

A good pair of sunglasses will help to protect your eyes from the sun. Please look for the following:

- 'CE Mark' and British Standard
- A UV 400 label and a statement re offering 100% protection

The most expensive sunglasses may not be the most protective!

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Other local sources of support and information:

Cancer Information Specialist

Free support and information is available from our Specialist, who is based in the

Macmillan Cancer Information Centre.

Main Entrance, University Hospital, Clifford Bridge Road

Coventry, CV2 2DX

Telephone: 024 7696 6052

Web: www.macmillan.org.uk

Macmillan Skin Cancer Nurse Specialists

University Hospital,

Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust

Telephone number via switchboard 024 7696 4000

Bleep: 4316

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format, contact 024 7696 6052 and we will do our best to meet your needs

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