

## Dermatology and Plastic Surgery

### Watch that spot

#### 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 3 main types of skin cancer:

1. Basal cell carcinoma
2. Squamous cell carcinoma
3. Malignant melanoma

#### These types are placed into 2 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, however, it is curable if treated early.



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

### **Symptoms and diagnosis**

Early detection and treatment are the key to successful outcomes, especially for melanoma. Several skin changes may signal 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 or excision may be performed. This means removing a small piece of skin or the entire lesion to be examined under a microscope for the presence of cancer cells.

### **What causes skin cancer?**

Sunshine is the main cause of all of skin cancers.

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

Malignant melanoma is associated with frequent high-intensity sun exposure, while non-melanoma skin cancer is caused by long-term exposure to low-intensity sunlight. The amount of sun exposure during

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childhood and the frequency of sunburn are believed to increase the risk of developing skin cancer in adult life. Therefore, it is most important to protect all children from intense sunlight.

Hats, T-shirts and sunscreens are recommended at home, at school and on holiday. This includes British holidays, as 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 and is therefore not advised.

### **Sun protection and sunscreens**

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

Remember to:

- Avoid staying out in 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 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 that reaches the skin. A sunscreen's Sun Protection Factor (SPF) measures how much radiation it allows through.

### **What does SPF mean?**

SPF stands for Sun Protection Factor and measures how much a sunscreen protects your skin from burning in the sun. The higher the SPF,

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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 compared to unprotected skin. However, sunscreens should not be used to allow you to remain in the sun for longer, instead, use them to give yourself greater protection.

Your chosen sunscreen should also have a 4 or 5-star rating, which is highlighted on the back of the bottle.

### **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 your ears, neck, bald patches, hands and feet.
- Reapply regularly, especially after swimming.

### **Don't forget to protect your eyes**

A good pair of UV protective sunglasses will help to protect your eyes from the sun. When selecting sunglasses, please remember that the most expensive sunglasses may not necessarily provide the best protection.

### **Other local sources of support and information:**

For further information about sunscreen and sun safety, please seek advice from the British Association of Dermatologists:

<https://www.skinhealthinfo.org.uk/sun-awareness/>

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For local support and advice, you can contact:

### **Macmillan cancer information centre.**

Main Entrance, University Hospital

Clifford Bridge Road

Coventry, CV2 2DX

Telephone: 024 7696 6052

Web: [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://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

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