

THE SUNDAY REPORT

INSIDE THE TIMES

healthy PERSPECTIVES

JOHN MUIR HEALTH

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Outsmarting Melanoma

The most serious of all skin cancers is melanoma. Melanoma accounts for three percent of all skin cancer cases, but is responsible for the most skin cancer deaths. According to the American Cancer Society, there will be more than 59,000 new cases of melanoma this year in the U.S.; 8,100 will die from the disease.

But there is some good news. People are more aware of the dangers of the sun than ever before and are more proactive in seeking help earlier. Like other types of skin cancer, basal cell and squamous cell carcinomas, melanoma is almost always curable in its early stages.

WHAT CAUSES MELANOMA?

Melanoma develops in melanocytes, cells that produce the dark protective pigment called melanin. Melanin produces sun-tanned skin, which acts as partial protection against the sun. But when melanocytes grow unregulated or uncontrollably, they can become melanomas, which have a potential to spread, and therefore must

be treated.

Melanomas may be associated with severe sunburns in childhood or adolescence. This is especially true among light-skinned people, although darker-skinned people can also develop it. Heredity may play a role. Atypical moles prevalent in families can serve as markers, and help identify those at higher risk for developing melanoma in a mole or other areas of the skin.

"A melanoma can often be as simple as a mole that is asymmetric, has multiple or changing colors, and irregular border or is growing," says Jerome Potozkin, M.D., chair of dermatology at John Muir Medical Center - Walnut Creek Campus. "That is why you need to be aware of your body and have any unusual moles checked."

According to the American Cancer Society, spots on the skin that change in size, shape, or color should be seen by a board certified dermatologist right away. Any unusual sore, lump, blemish, marking, or change in the way an area of the skin looks or feels may be a sign of

skin cancer. "The earlier melanoma is detected, the better the survival rate," adds Dr. Potozkin.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF MELANOMA?

Learn your ABCDs:

- **A**symmetry - One half doesn't match the other half.
- **B**order irregularity - The edges are ragged, notched or blurred.
- **C**olor - Pigmentation is not uniform. Shades of tan, brown and black are present. Dashes of red, white and blue can add to the mottled appearance.
- **D**iameter - Any mole that grows should be a concern, especially if it's bigger than a pencil eraser.

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP PREVENT MELANOMA?

Prevention is the best weapon. Avoid excessive sun exposure and use a sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or higher. Apply sunscreen 30 minutes before you plan to head outside and

be sure to reapply every two hours or sooner if you are very active or swimming.

Stay out of the sun between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. when the UV light is most intensive. And always wear a hat, protective clothing and sunglasses.

If you had excessive sunburns with blistering during your early years, precautions taken today may not make up for early skin damage. You must be especially alert to any significant skin changes.

Monthly Self-Examination can help you identify any new or developing lesion. It's important to thoroughly check all areas of the body. To do so, you need a full-length mirror, a hand mirror and good lighting.

- Examine the skin on your front and back in the mirror, then your right and left sides with arms raised.
- Bend your elbows and look carefully at forearms, backs of upper arms and palms.
- Check the backs of legs and feet, including soles and between the toes. (Sometimes, melanoma can be unrelated to sun exposure.)
- With a hand mirror, look at the back of the neck and scalp. Lift your hair off your neck to see underneath.
- Finally, check your back and buttocks with the hand mirror.

HOW IS SKIN CANCER TREATED?

If a lab test reveals an area of skin as cancerous, the dermatolo-

gist has an array of procedures to recommend. The techniques are chosen to meet the patient's needs. Depending on the stage of the melanoma when diagnosed, surgery, chemotherapy, or biological therapy (immunotherapy) may be used. But as Dr. Potozkin notes, "If caught early, surgery is all that is needed in most cases of melanoma."

Surgery to remove the tumor and a margin of surrounding healthy tissue is the standard treatment for melanoma. If a large area is removed, a skin graft may be done at the same time, using skin from another part of your body. A few lymph nodes near the tumor may be removed to see whether cancer has spread through the lymphatic system to other parts of the body. In advanced cases, radiation therapy is used to relieve some of the symptoms caused by melanoma.

"Treatment of melanoma continues to evolve as medicine advances, but today, the best plan remains prevention and early detection," notes Curtis Raskin, M.D., dermatologist on staff at John Muir Medical Center - Concord Campus. "The importance of protecting children from the sun's damage can't be overemphasized. Even mild sunburns can dramatically increase their risk for skin cancer. Teach children to be sun-savvy and wear hats and sunblock when outdoors, even on hazy days."

This article is part of a series of informational advertisements focusing on health brought to you by John Muir Health and the John Muir Physician Network.

healthy HAPPENINGS

Free Lecture

Skin Cancer: Epidemic on the Rise

Jerome Potozkin, M.D.

May 15, 6:30 - 8 p.m.

Women's Health Center

1656 N. California Blvd

Walnut Creek

(925) 941-7900 for reservation

Community Event Celebration at the Ranch Honoring Cancer Survivors

Bring your own picnic lunch

and join local community groups in honor of National Cancer Survivors' Day

June 3, 11 a.m. - 4 p.m.

Little Hills Ranch

18013 Bollinger Canyon Road

San Ramon

- Live entertainment for the whole family
- Sports activities
- Massages
- Games for kids
- Door prize drawing

RSVP by May 30 to (925) 947-4447

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