



PREVENTING SKIN CANCER

The Issue

Most cases of skin cancer are preventable. You can reduce your risk of getting skin cancer by taking some simple but important steps.

Background

Skin plays a vital role in keeping us healthy. It is the largest organ in our body, and it protects us from potential problems caused by such factors as dehydration, the sun, bacterial infections, and pollution. However, the skin's ability to protect us has limits. Various factors can cause damage that cannot be repaired. This is how skin cancer may develop.

About Skin Cancer

There are three main types of skin cancer: basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma, and malignant melanoma.

Most cases of skin cancer in Canada are either basal or squamous cell carcinoma. These skin cancers tend to develop later in life on skin that has been exposed repeatedly to the sun, such as the face, neck, or hands. Basal and squamous cell carcinomas progress slowly and rarely cause death because they usually don't spread to other parts of the body. These cancers are easily removed by surgery.

Malignant melanomas are different. They account for only one or two percent of all skin cancers, but are the type most likely

to be fatal. Unlike other skin cancers, they occur earlier in life and progress rapidly. They may develop on almost any part of the body.

The occurrence rate of skin cancer has been fairly constant in Canada for the past 30 years. The number of malignant melanomas has been relatively low.

Causes of Skin Cancer

One of the main causes of skin cancer is exposure to ultraviolet radiation, or UV rays. UV rays are invisible, and are produced by the sun and certain kinds of lamps. Most often, skin cancer is the result of overexposure to the sun.

UV rays cause skin cancer by creating changes in the cells of the skin. They can damage the cell directly; tans and sunburns, for example, are both signs that UV rays have damaged the skin. In other cases, UV rays cause skin cancer indirectly, by weakening the immune mechanisms in skin and the rest of the body.

Many studies of skin cancer show links between malignant melanomas and an individual's intolerance to sun exposure. These results indicate that people who have suffered severe and frequent sunburns are at greater risk of developing skin cancer. The features most closely associated with intolerance to sun exposure include fair or freckled skin, blue eyes, and light-colored or reddish hair.



Minimizing Your Risk

Most people can prevent skin cancer by avoiding overexposure to the sun and other sources of ultraviolet light, such as sun-lamps. To avoid the harmful effects of UV rays, you should:

- Select shaded areas for out-door activities
- Wear a broad-brimmed hat and clothing with a tight weave, including a long-sleeved shirt, long pants and gloves, if you have to spend long periods in the sun
- if you can't cover up, use a sunscreen lotion with a Sun Protection Factor (SPF) of at least 15. Make sure it has both UVA and UVB protection. Apply liberally to exposed sites 15 to 30 minutes before going out in the sun, followed by re-application to exposed sites 15 to 30 minutes after sun exposure begins. Further application is necessary after vigorous activity that could remove the product, such as swimming, toweling or excessive sweating and rubbing
- Avoid overexposing yourself to the sun without protection, especially between 11:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. during the summer months
- Avoid using sunlamps
- Be aware that certain medications, such as tetracycline, can make your skin more sensitive to UV rays, consult your doctor if you have questions about your medication

The precautions listed above are especially important for babies and children who are at greater risk than adults because of their thinner skin.

- Never let infants or young children play or sleep in the sun in a playpen, stroller, or carriage
- Don't let young children stay in the sun for long periods, even when wearing sunscreen
- Get your children used to wearing sunscreen lotion. Pay particular attention to the areas that are most exposed, such as the face, neck, shoulders, back, knees, and the tops of their feet
- Provide teenagers with sunscreen lotion if they are going to be outdoors for extended periods during the summer, make sure they understand the importance of using it
- Advise teenagers not to use sunlamps

The best way to detect skin cancer in its early stages is to examine your skin often. See your doctor right away if you notice any of the following:

- abnormally dark or discoloured patches or spots
- bleeding, crusting or change in the colour, size, or shape of a mole.

Need More Info?

Population and Public Health Branch, Cancer Bureau
<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hpb/lcdc/bc/index.html>

It's Your Health - UV Radiation
<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/iyh/environment/ultraviolet.html>

It's Your Health - Sunscreens
<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/iyh/lifestyles/sunscreen.html>

Health Canada's Climate Change and Health Office at:
http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hecs-sesc/ccho/health_story_table.htm

Canadian Cancer Society
<http://www.cancer.ca/>

Environment Canada's UV Index and sun protection Web site at:
http://www.msc-smc.ec.gc.ca/education/uvindex/index_e.html

Additional It's Your Health articles can be found at:
www.healthcanada.ca/iyh
You can also call (613) 957-2991