

Skin cancer hits people under 40

A Mayo Clinic study says non-melanomas have tripled in the group in the past 30 years.

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Carefree days spent under the sun or inside a tanning booth might be contributing to an increased rate of non-melanoma skin cancer among people under age 40, Mayo Clinic researchers said Wednesday.

The study, published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, found the rate of two types of non-melanoma skin cancer among young adults has tripled during the past 30 years, a troubling statistic that comes despite increased awareness of the need for sunscreen.

Of particular concern to experts was the study's finding that the increase was greater in women under 40 than in men because women are more likely to use tanning beds or bronze for hours under the sun despite health warnings. Shroff, medical oncologist and hematologist in Winter Park.

"While the rates in this study may be higher in women, that doesn't mean men shouldn't be careful," Shroff said.

Although the study looked at a relatively small group of 500 mostly white people with skin cancer in a Minnesota town, Shroff said the group has similar characteristics to other white populations across America, including Florida, where sunburns cause a higher rate of the most serious skin cancer than anywhere but California.

People with darker skin still have a risk of skin cancer, but at a lower rate than white people, research shows. Shroff's study also addressed whether nonwhite groups had seen similar increases in skin cancers among young adults.

The Mayo researchers focused on two kinds of non-melanomas called squamous cell and basal cell carcinomas, which together account for 90 percent of the 1.5 million people annually. The cancers are named after the skin cells that are affected.

Experts cite more sunbathing activity and use of tanning beds over the years as the likely culprits for the increase. Other causes are tobacco use, which is linked to squamous cell carcinoma, and depletion of the ozone layer, which has increased harmful ultraviolet radiation.

About 80 percent of skin cancers are basal cell carcinoma, which are slow-growing and not as likely to metastasize to other areas. Squamous cell carcinoma is less common, perhaps 16 percent of cases, but is a little more likely to spread to other body parts. The deadliest is melanoma.

Melanomas usually appear as a brown or black patch on the skin, while non-melanomas can look like a pimple.

"But if the pimple or sore is not healing or not changing, that's a tip-off that it might be skin cancer," Price said.

Doctors in Central Florida, who often see many patients with years of sun exposure, said they were not surprised to find melanoma cancers cited in the study.

"We see a fair number of younger patients in our practice who have grown up around here get basal cell and squamous cell skin cancer," said an Orlando-based dermatologist.

One troublesome finding in the Mayo Clinic study is that incidence rates of basal cell carcinoma in women have increased. Women are more likely to inspect their skin on a regular basis, which could account for the higher rates of detection.

Although doctors have been stressing the use of skin-protecting lotion for decades, less than one-third of people use it, the Skin Cancer Foundation reports.

"There's a strong desire to have a tan," said Dr. Alan Forbes, chairman of the Department of Radiation Oncology at the University of Florida. "More people are using less sunscreen than before. It's a shame, really, because the sun protective creams now are more effective."

Melody Johnson, 22, has heard the warnings but stops short of slathering on the protective lotion.

"I don't usually use sunscreen, even though I should," said Johnson of Orlando. Smiling, Johnson added, "I'm

In some cases, it takes a scare to promote change.

Beth Brandon, 27, had her own close call with skin cancer. Three years ago, the Florida State University student developed melanoma. Now, when Brandon runs during the day, she wears sunscreen -- usually SPF 30 -- and tries not to be in the sun more than an hour.

Brandon also avoids tanning beds, after doctors told her they might have caused her condition.

Shroff said she hopes this study will encourage others to be more vigilant about skin-cancer prevention.

"Young people just aren't aware that skin cancer is something that can affect them as well," she said.

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