

# The Basics of Skin Cancer... and how to prevent it

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Every surfer worries about hazards he or she may face while in the water, but most do not think about the dangers that can occur above the surface. Surfers and avid beach-goers alike should be aware that they are exposing themselves to health risks when they spend time in the sun. While many people do use some form of skin protection, often it is not enough to fully protect their skin from sun damage.

Skin cancer accounts for nearly half of all reported cancers in the United States and is the most common form of cancer. Over one million new cases of skin cancer are diagnosed every year.

## What is skin cancer?

There are three different types of skin cancer - Basal cell carcinoma, Squamous cell carcinoma and Melanoma. Basal cell carcinoma is the most common skin cancer, but Melanoma has the highest death rate, according to Dr. Julie R. Kenner of the Kenner Dermatology Center.

Basal cell carcinoma, or BCC, is caused by frequent sun exposure (UVB and UVA rays) and affects the basal cells that line the bottom of the epidermis, the outer layer of skin. This type of skin cancer spreads slowly and often appears as a reddish patch, dark bump or an open sore.

Squamous cell carcinoma is the second most common type of skin cancer and, like BCC, is found in the epidermis and is caused by prolonged exposure to the sun. While Squamous cell carcinoma is similar to BCC, it has one major difference - it will often spread into other parts of the body if left untreated. Squamous cell carcinoma develops on the skin as a wart-like bump, a red, scaly patch or an open sore that bleeds for long periods of time.

The least common but most severe type of skin cancer is Melanoma. Melanoma begins as a malignant tumor in melanocytes, which are the cells that produce melanin. Melanin is the pigment that gives color to our hair, skin and eyes. Although Melanoma can be caused by chronic sun exposure, its development can also be linked to heredity. About one in every ten people with Melanoma has a family member who has had the disease. Melanoma often appears as a brown or black irregularly shaped patch and often develops in already existing moles.

According to Keller, "Rates of Melanoma have been increasing astronomically. In 1935, 1 in 1500 were diagnosed with Melanoma and now it's 1 in 60." Kenner indicated that the rise in Melanoma could be due to the increase in the hole in the ozone layer or people's participation in more outdoor activities.

## Detection and Prevention

While anyone who spends time in the sun is at risk for developing skin cancer, people who have light hair, fair skin and blue or green eyes

are at the highest risk. Those who spend prolonged time outdoors are also at high risk for developing the disease.

Early detection is very important in treating skin cancer, especially Melanoma.

Kenner explains, "If you catch it early, there is a high success rate of curing it, but if you catch it late, it is completely the opposite."

Once diagnosed, a number of different treatments can be used to effectively remove the cancerous area. These treatments range from topical medications to surgery to radiation.

Even if you have no hereditary links to skin cancer, it is still important to take precautionary measures.

One of the best ways to detect the early signs of skin cancer is to do a monthly self-examination of your skin. Examine your entire body and check for any skin discoloration, growths, sores or changes in moles. If you notice a change or any sudden discoloration, make an appointment with a dermatologist. Remember, early detection is very important.

It is also important to try to prevent skin cancer before it starts. Use sunscreen properly by applying 30 minutes before getting the water and reapply as needed. Be sure to pick a sunscreen that has at least an SPF rating of 15, is water-resistant and is labeled as broad-spectrum.

"Most sunscreens only protect against the UVB factor, which causes burning, but not against the UVA factor, which causes aging," Kenner said.

However, if a sunscreen is labeled as broad-spectrum, it is made to protect the skin from both UVB and some UVA wavelengths. To be sure that you are getting the best available sunscreen, check for the Skin Cancer Foundation's Seal of Recommendation. This seal signifies that the product has met the highest standards for effectiveness and safety. Kenner also recommends wearing chapstick with sunscreen in it and reminds you to protect your nose as well.

Simply covering your skin from the sun can significantly reduce your risk of sun cancer and sunburns. Wear clothing while at the beach and a rash guard while in the water.

"It is important to wear a rash guard, but you have to look around; they have SPF ratings on the rash guards," Kenner said.

Another way to decrease your chances of developing skin cancer is to limit the amount of time you spend in the sun, especially during the middle of the day. The worst time to be in the sun is between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. Go to the beach in the morning or late afternoon, when the sun is less harsh. ■