

We're not the brightest when the sun comes out

Spring is here and so is National Melanoma and Skin Cancer Prevention Month.

Washingtonians need to take serious note - the Environmental Protection Agency released current skin cancer statistics and the state ranks first nationally for women and fifth for men with malignant melanoma.

Those are startling, even counterintuitive statistics, especially here on the rainy side of the state. The EPA's SunWise Program was recently in Seattle to teach people that they can get sunburned even when it's cloudy out. And as we all know, that's a good deal of the time here. And the lighter your skin, the greater your chances of being burned. And there's a lot of pale skin here after a winter of constant rain.

According to an Associated Press report, the EPA's educational program focuses on children because skin damage is cumulative. A sunburn when you are a teen can become a skin cancer over 20 years' time. The EPA says ultraviolet rays can damage skin in 15 minutes and five or more sunburns can double a person's lifetime skin-cancer risk. And with the ongoing depletion of the upper ozone layer, which allows more of the sun's UV radiation to reach us, the risk of skin and eye problems is increased, the AP reported.

The EPA provides these sobering numbers:

- * The agency estimates that 2.3 million teens visit a tanning salon at least once a year and fewer than half ever use sunscreen outdoors.
- * More than a million cases of skin cancer are expected to be diagnosed this year and roughly 10 percent will be malignant melanoma, which causes more than 70 percent of skin cancer deaths.
- * An American dies of melanoma every 67 minutes. The disease is expected to cause 7,910 deaths this year, 5,020 men and 2,890 women.
- * It's the fifth leading cause of cancer in Washington, with rates growing an average of 6 percent a year since 1992.
- * In 2002, 2,224 cases were reported in the state, resulting in 155 deaths.

It's not just children who need education. When the sun does come out here, the urge can be great to make up for months of rain with hours and hours in the sun. That is not recommended. The EPA suggests trying to limit sun time between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., which isn't really practical, so people should follow the EPA's other advice: Wear a hat and sunglasses that block 99 to 100 percent of UV rays. Always use sunscreen with a SPF of 15 or higher and reapply often. Avoid

tanning salons.

Showing skin is always in during the summer. Just be sure to protect it.