

Dark side of the sun

June 29 2009, by Tom Vasich



UCI skin disorder specialist Dr. Janellen Smith stresses that people - especially those in sun-worshipping Southern California - should be aware of the health risks associated with prolonged sun exposure and take proper precautions. (Daquella Manera)

As a specialist in skin disorders and cancers, Dr. Janellen Smith sees firsthand what too much sun can do. Sunburns and accelerated skin aging are common results, but excessive sun exposure also can be deadly.

Each year, more than 1 million Americans are diagnosed with skin cancer, the most common of all cancers. About 50,000 of these cases involve melanoma, the most serious form of skin cancer. If not treated promptly, it can spread to other parts of the body and prove fatal. Smith, a UC Irvine dermatology professor affiliated with the Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center, stresses that people - especially those in sun-worshipping Southern California - should be aware of the health risks associated with prolonged sun exposure and take proper

precautions.

Q: Who should be most concerned about excessive sun exposure?

A: The sun is harmful to all skin types, but people with lighter skin that freckles easily are the most at risk. Another big risk factor is a family history of skin cancer. People with darker skin, especially Latinos, are developing skin cancers at an increased rate. Asians and African Americans are not immune to melanoma either, and when it does appear, it's often on the palms, on the soles of the feet or under the fingernails.

Q: Why should people be concerned about getting too much sun?

A: The three most important reasons are the development of skin cancer, faster aging and the interaction the sun can have with certain medications. When I talk to patients, I often emphasize the ravages of aging, because they never think they'll get cancer.

Q: What types of cancer can people get from sun exposure?

A: There are three main types of [skin cancer](#): basal cell carcinoma, [squamous cell carcinoma](#) and melanoma. Basal cells are the most common, but melanomas are the most deadly.

Q: How can excess sun lead to melanoma?

A: Chronic sun exposure leads to the development of nonmelanoma skin cancers, and sporadic, high-intensity sun exposure leads to the development of melanomas. There is some crossover, but this is often the case. Damage is done to the skin that overwhelms the body's repair mechanisms.

Q: What can be done for sun-damaged skin?

A: The sooner you get out of the habit of excess [sun exposure](#) the better. It sometimes seems as if this does no good, as some of the damage previously incurred is still developing. But eventually you will reap the benefits. UC Irvine Medical Center dermatologists have many methods for helping you. There are creams, lasers and fillers that go a long way in returning your skin to its peak condition.

Q: What products help protect the skin, and which ones should be avoided?

A: Sunscreens that contain avobenzone, titanium dioxide, zinc oxide or mexoryl are the best at protecting the skin from all wavelengths of damaging light. Tightly woven clothing is also protective, and some companies make clothing with sun protection factor (SPF) ratings. Do not use baby oil in the sun; it is not protective.

Q: What do you recommend people do this summer to maximize good skin health?

A: Avoid the sun during the peak hours of 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and use sunscreen and sun-protective clothing. Sometimes it's best to think of your day upside down: If you normally go to the beach in the afternoon and the movies at night, think about making a switch. There is nothing quite so fine as walking along the beach as the sun goes down, and movie theaters are much less crowded in the afternoon.

Provided by University of California, Irvine

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