

Expert spotlights early detection for melanoma awareness month

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May brings Melanoma Awareness Month, along with the Memorial Day holiday and the beginning of summer vacations. With longer days and more outdoor activities, Baylor College of Medicine's Dr. Ida Orengo, professor of dermatology, addresses the dangers hiding behind sunburns and sun exposure.

Although the risk for melanoma increases with age, it is also the most common [cancer](#) in young women in their 20s and 30s. A cancer of the [skin](#) that results from blistering sunburns in childhood and regular, unprotected [sun exposure](#), melanoma accounts for only about 1 percent of skin cancers, but results in a large majority of skin cancer related deaths, according to the American Cancer Society.

"One thing many people misunderstand about melanoma is that it can be deadly," Orengo said. "On its own, the cure rate for melanoma when it is detected early is 94 to 100 percent, however once it metastasizes and spreads to other areas of the body, the survival drops to 20 percent."

When performing a skin check on a patient, Orengo and other dermatologists follow the ABCs of mole evaluation, looking for asymmetry, border irregularity, color variation, change in diameter, evolution or change in appearance, and [family history](#) of melanoma.

Melanoma is most likely to present on the back of men and the legs of women, but I can also occur in non-sun exposed areas such as the scalp, on the bottoms of the feet or in the eye.

Those with fair skin and a family history of melanoma are most at risk for the disease. Orengo recommends practicing primary prevention by wearing sunscreen, sunglasses and protective clothing, such as long sleeve shirts and hats.

"Thirty minutes before heading outdoors, apply a thick layer of broad spectrum sunscreen, of at least 30 SPF, and reapply every couple of hours," Orengo said. "A common saying I like to tell patients is that if you have a short shadow when outside, you should seek shade, as the sun is likely at its most powerful."

Orengo mentions that in addition to traditional sunscreen, there are a few products on the market to provide additional protection, such as laundry detergent that coats clothing in SPF and sunscreen that can be applied in the shower as body wash.

"While it is important to always protect yourself against the sun, it is also crucial that parents make sure their children are appropriately protected, as one blistering sunburn during childhood increases the risk of [melanoma](#) more than double during their lifetime," Orengo said.

Provided by Baylor College of Medicine

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