



Sun Damage and Skin Cancer: Protect Yourself All Year 'Round

What are you doing every day to protect yourself from skin cancer? According to the American Cancer Society, skin cancer is the most common form of cancer in the United States. More than two million Americans are diagnosed with skin cancer each year.

There are 3 main types of skin cancer: basal cell, squamous cell and melanoma. Basal cell and squamous cell cancers are most common. While these cancers seldom become life threatening, the removal of these cancers can cause scarring and disfigurement of the affected areas – commonly on the face, nose, ears and other areas of the body. Melanoma, the most serious type of skin cancer, can be cured when found early. Melanomas that are not found early can often be fatal as they spread and reach vital organs making treatment less successful.

The incidence rate of melanoma (i.e., the rate of new cases diagnosed each year) in the South Heartland health district is about 25 per 100,000 population. According to Michele Bever, South Heartland District Health Department executive director, “this equates to about 12 new cases per year in the four county health district of Adams, Clay, Nuckolls and Webster counties”. The mortality rate for melanoma (i.e., the rate of deaths occurring each year) is about 5.5 per 100,000 population in the district. Dr. Bever says “this equates to approximately 2-3 deaths per year across our four counties.” These rates are both higher than the overall Nebraska rates.

Sun damage to the skin is caused by invisible ultraviolet (UV) radiation. UV rays can damage DNA or the genetic material in our cells. It is important to recognize sunburn as a type of skin damage caused by the sun. Tanning is also a sign of the skin reacting to UV radiation by producing additional pigmentation. Tanned skin is also damaged skin, so no tan is ever a safe tan.

Harmful rays from the sun and from tanning beds may also cause eye problems, weaken your immune system, and give you skin spots, wrinkles, or "leathery" skin.

Anyone can get skin cancer, but some people are at higher risk. If you have lighter natural skin color or skin that burns easily or forms freckles in the sun, you are at higher risk for skin cancer. If you experienced sunburns early in life or spend time working or playing in the sun, you are at higher risk for skin cancer. Family history or having close relatives who have had melanoma also puts you at higher risk. Talk with your doctor if you have a family history of melanoma.

Children, teens and adults can greatly reduce the risk for developing skin cancer by practicing the following sun safe behaviors while still enjoying time outdoors:

1. Be Serious about Sunscreen

Not all sunscreens are created equal so it is important to always check the product's label. When choosing a sunscreen make sure it has a “sun protection factor” (SPF) of 30 or higher. SPF represents the degree to which a sunscreen can protect the skin from sunburn. Your sunscreen should also provide “broad spectrum” protection—sunscreen that protects against all types of skin damage caused by sunlight. And, lastly, be sure to choose a sunscreen that is water resistant—sunscreen that stays on your skin longer, even if it gets wet. Reapply water-resistant sunscreens as instructed on the label.

Before going outdoors, always remember to apply sunscreen 30 minutes before going outside. This allows for the sunscreen to penetrate the upper skin layers for better protection. Sunscreen should be reapplied every two hours and after being in water or exercising. Don't forget to protect your ears, nose, lips, back of your neck and tops of feet.

2. Reduce Time in the Sun—Seek Shade

It's important to limit sun exposure when you are out between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., when the sun's rays are strongest. Even on an overcast day, up to 80 percent of the sun's UV rays can get through the clouds. Stay in the shade as much as possible throughout the day.

3. Cover Up

Wear clothes that protect your body. If you plan on being outside on a sunny day, cover as much of your body as possible. Wear a wide-brimmed hat, long sleeves, and pants.

4. Protect the Eyes

Protect your eyes from UV rays which can lead to cataracts later in life. Look for sunglasses that wrap around and block close to 100% of both UVA and UVB rays.

5. Get to know your skin – your moles, freckles and birthmarks. Check your skin monthly and look for changes in the number, size, shape and color of spots on your skin. Melanoma may start on your skin without warning or it may start in or near a mole or dark spot in the skin. See your doctor if you find new or changing skin growths.

Skin cancer is preventable. Sun safety is never out of season so when you are outdoors enjoying the sun, make sure you are well protected from its rays. Stop in and visit the Sun Safety education and screening area at the Vital Signs Health Fair in Hastings on March 24 and 25. Educational materials will be available for everyone and free skin scope assessments and skin cancer screenings by licensed providers are available for adults 19 years and older.

For more information, tips and videos on skin cancer and how to prevent it, visit the following websites:

- <http://southheartlandhealth.org/services-guide/sun-safety/>
- <http://www.cdc.gov/Features/SkinCancer/>
- <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/skin-cancer.html>

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