

Sun Safety Every Day, All Year

Skin cancer is the most common cancer in the United States and is a concern in the South Heartland health district of Adams, Clay, Nuckolls and Webster Counties. The rates of new cases of skin cancer diagnosed (about 14 cases each year) and the rates of death from skin cancer (about 2-3 deaths each year) are higher in the South Heartland area than in Nebraska overall.

The South Heartland Cancer Coalition, a group of partners committed to reducing cancer in south central Nebraska, is taking the lead in educating residents on the importance of preventing skin cancer through sun safe practices and screening for early detection. Coalition members will be providing sun safety education at the Nuckolls County Health Fair on April 27, and education plus limited skin screenings by licensed providers at the Vital Signs Health Fair at the Adams County Fairgrounds on March 23 and 24.

Due to the high rates of skin cancer cases and deaths in this area, one of the coalition partners focused its prevention and screening activities on skin cancer this past year. Sally Molnar, director of Mary Lanning's Morrison Cancer Center (MCC), is passionate about helping to prevent skin cancer. She and her staff have been sharing a message that skin cancer is preventable if sun safe practices are utilized.

In 2018, the MCC outreach focused on educating youth ages 12-17 years on sun safety and why catching skin cancer early is beneficial. The MCC team gave presentations to 357 students in local schools. Students completed a pre and post questionnaire to determine how much they already knew and how much new information they learned from the presentations. Success story: following the presentation, students demonstrated increased awareness of sun safe practices and more students understood the importance of being sun safe to prevent skin cancers later in life.

There are three main types of skin cancer: basal cell, squamous cell and melanoma. Basal cell and squamous cell cancers are the most common skin cancers and seldom become life threatening. These cancers can be removed but this can cause scarring and disfigurement of the affected area which most often is the face, nose and ears. Melanoma is the most serious type of skin cancer. Melanoma can be cured when found early, but melanomas that are not found early can be fatal when they spread and reach vital organs, making treatment less successful.

Anyone, no matter their skin tone, 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.

Exposure to ultraviolet (UV) rays from the sun or from artificial sources like tanning beds are the most common cause of skin cancer. UV rays can damage DNA which is the genetic material in our cells.

What can you do to prevent skin cancer? The South Heartland Cancer Coalition encourages you to make sun safety part of your everyday practices, all year 'round:

- 1. Seek shade, especially during midday hours.** Limit sun exposure 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.
- 2. Wear a wide-brimmed hat, sunglasses, and protective clothing** to protect your skin and your eyes. If you plan on being outside on a sunny day, cover as much of your body as possible.
- 3. Use a "broad spectrum" sunscreen with a "sun protection factor" (SPF) of 30** or more to protect exposed skin. "Broad spectrum" protection means the sunscreen protects against all types of skin damage caused by sunlight. SPF represents the degree to which a sunscreen can protect the skin from sunburn. Be sure to choose a sunscreen that is water resistant which means it will stay on your skin longer, even if it gets wet. When applying, use a generous amount and don't forget to protect your ears, nose, lips, back of your neck and tops of feet. Sunscreen works best when used with shade or clothes, and it must be re-applied every 2 hours and after swimming, sweating, or towelng off.
- 4. 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 coloration or growths.

Skin cancer is preventable and sun safety is never out of season. So, when you are outdoors working, exercising or just enjoying the sun, make sure you are well protected from its rays.

For more information on skin cancer and how to prevent it visit www.southheartlandhealth.org.

Dorrann Hultman is the community health services coordinator for South Heartland District Health Department, serving Adams, Clay, Nuckolls and Webster counties in Nebraska. She may be reached at 402.462-6211.