



## Skin Cancer FAQs

### **What is melanoma and is it life threatening?**

Melanoma is a type of skin cancer and is considered to be the most dangerous form of the disease. Although it only accounts for 5% of all diagnosed skin cancers, melanomas account for over 75% of skin cancer deaths.

Melanoma develops in cells called melanocytes which are responsible for creating skin pigmentation or melanin. Melanin is what gives our skin its natural hue. As skin is exposed to the UV rays of the sun, more melanin is produced to prevent burning of the skin. The end result is damage to the DNA in skin cells. UV rays can also be found in tanning booths and lamps, so indoor tanning is not any safer than natural sun exposure.

People with many moles are at a higher risk for developing melanoma. Although most moles are benign, there are certain types that carry a higher risk such as dysplastic nevi, also referred to as atypical moles. They often have a melanoma-like appearance.

Melanoma can be life threatening if left untreated or diagnosed in late stages. There are medications and therapies for the disease. Early detection is key. Detected early, there is an excellent survival rate.

### **What facts should I know about melanoma?**

Although melanoma accounts for only about 4 to 5 percent of all skin cancer cases, it causes most skin cancer-related deaths. However, if detected and treated in its earliest stages, melanoma is often curable.

Skin cancer affects one in five Americans, and more than 1 million new cases are diagnosed each year. Of these cases, more than 65,000 are melanoma, a cancer that claims nearly 11,000 lives each year. In men, melanoma is most often found on the area between the shoulders and hips or on the head and neck. In women, melanoma often develops on the lower legs. The chance of developing melanoma increases with age, yet it is still one of the most common cancers in young adults.

### **Why are UV rays bad for your skin?**

There are three types of ultraviolet (UV) rays from the sun:

- UV-A: These rays maintain relatively constant intensity throughout the year. They contribute to premature aging of the skin, sunburn and even skin cancer.
- UV-B: More intense than UV-A rays, these are stronger in summer months, at higher altitudes and closer to the equator. They can contribute to premature aging of the skin and can cause cataracts, a clouding of the eye. Exposure to UV-B rays over a lifetime can lead to skin cancer and even affect the immune system.
- UV-C: These rays are the strongest and most dangerous, but they are normally filtered by the ozone layer in the earth's atmosphere.

UV exposure is greatest when the sun is highest in the sky between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. It is also greatest in the summer, at higher altitudes and nearer the equator. Furthermore, up to 80 percent of the sun's rays can penetrate light clouds, mist and fog.

Fresh snow reflects back about 85 percent of the sun's rays; water reflects back about 5 percent of the sun's rays; concrete reflects back 10 to 12 percent of the sun's rays.



Protecting your skin during the first 18 years of life can reduce the risk of some types of skin cancer by up to 78 percent. One severe sunburn during the first 15 years of life can double the risk of skin cancer.

## **How do I protect my skin from UV rays?**

The American Association of Dermatologists recommends that everyone follow these sun protection guidelines:

- Avoid outdoor activities between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. when the sun's rays are the strongest.
- Seek shade whenever possible.
- Wear a broad-spectrum sunscreen with a Sun Protection Factor (SPF) of 15 or higher.
- Wear sun protective clothing and accessories, such as wide-brimmed hats and sunglasses.
- Follow the "Shadow Rule"—if your shadow is shorter than you are, the sun's damaging rays are at their strongest and you are likely to burn.
- Conduct a [monthly self skin exam](#) to check for changes in moles, warts and other blemishes on the skin, especially parts which are exposed to the sun.

Detection is still the most important tool for catching skin cancer early and treating it effectively.

## **Is the sun really the cause of skin cancer?**

Studies have confirmed that sun exposure is responsible for the development of at least two-thirds of all melanomas. Furthermore, it is estimated that 80 percent of a person's lifetime sun damage occurs before the age of 18, a significant portion of which occurs during peak sun hours and in the summer.

According to a survey by the American Academy of Dermatology, parents reported applying a sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 15 or higher as their most frequent sun protection behavior (53 percent). Children using sunscreen spent an average of nearly 22 percent more time in the sun on a weekend than children who were not using sunscreen.

Studies have shown that sunburn is often the result of incorrect use of sunscreen. Since people frequently apply only 20 to 50 percent of the recommended amount of sunscreen, they only receive 20 to 50 percent of the SPF protection.

## **Are there factors that put some people at higher risk than others to develop skin cancer?**

Yes, these factors include:

- Lighter natural skin color
- Family history of skin cancer
- Personal history of skin cancer
- Exposure to the sun through work and play
- A history of sunburns early in life
- Skin that burns, freckles, reddens easily or becomes painful in the sun
- Blue or green eyes
- Blond or red hair
- Certain types of moles or a large number of moles