

## Skin cancer - risk factors and early signs

Australians suffer the highest rates of skin cancer in the world. Each year, around 1,200 Australians die from what is an almost totally preventable disease. Everyone can develop skin cancer; however, some people may be at higher risk than others, due to a range of factors.

### **Australia exposed to more UV**

Ultraviolet (UV) radiation levels in Australia are higher than in Europe, even during summer. Being located close to the ozone hole over the Antarctic means much higher, more severe levels of UV radiation get through to ground level.

During summer, the earth's orbit brings Australia closer to the sun than Europe during its summer, resulting in an additional seven per cent solar UV intensity. This, coupled with our clearer atmospheric conditions, means we are exposed to up to 15 per cent more UV than Europeans.

### **Incidence of skin cancer in Australia**

In Australia, incidence rates for skin cancers are rising in both males and females. Melanoma rates in men are stabilising and, in women, are declining slightly.

The continued increase in skin cancer is due to many years of doing little to protect our skin. In the past, we did not know the value of covering up or using sunscreen. As a result, many people are now developing skin cancers.

Over the past 10 years, skin cancer control programs like SunSmart and the Slip! Slop! Slap! campaign have educated us about the importance of sun protection and the need to check our skin regularly. Because more people are checking their skin, more cases of cancer are being diagnosed.

Skin cancer rates in Australia should decline early this century if 'sunsmart' behaviour trends continue to grow.

### **Long term sun exposure and sunburn damage skin cells**

Both long term sun exposure and sunburn cause skin cell damage, which - over time - can lead to the development of skin cancer. Outdoor workers suffer from a high incidence of squamous cell carcinoma, a skin cancer caused predominantly by years of being outdoors.

Severe sunburn increases your risk of developing melanoma. In fact, five doses of sunburn while you are young can double your risk of developing this deadly disease later in life. Mild sunburn or tanning is also not acceptable. There is no safe way to expose yourself to the sun without increasing your risk of skin cancer.

### **Hereditary factors are important**

Hereditary factors play an important part in susceptibility to skin cancer. This is demonstrated by the increased incidence of skin cancer among people of Anglo-Celtic origin. If one or both of your parents have had a skin cancer, you could be at risk, as you will have the same skin as them.

In a rare inherited condition, people with xeroderma pigmentosum have a defect in their enzyme system, which is responsible for the repair of UV damaged DNA. As a result, they develop signs of sun damage while very young and usually develop skin cancer before they turn 10.

### **Skin type**

Skin type is genetic. If your parents have fair skin, you will too and you will have a greater risk of skin damage due to exposure to the sun. Parents with fair skin should educate their children about the importance of sun protection and encourage them to develop good sun protection habits from an early age. This is the best way to help reduce their risk of skin damage and skin cancer in later life.

People with darker skin naturally have more protection against sunburn than fairer skinned people. However, they are still at risk of sun damage and skin cancer. Indigenous Australians, one of the darkest skinned races in Australia, can still get melanoma.

### **Moles and freckles**

Most people have moles and freckles. However, if you have a great number of freckles or moles (more than 50 moles), you are at risk of skin damage.

Moles or freckles that grow, change shape or colour, bleed or ulcerate, or new spots that appear, should be treated with suspicion. Have your doctor check out any unusual spots as soon as possible.

### **Solariums**

Solariums tan the skin by radiating it with both UVA and UVB radiation. Both these types of radiation are dangerous to the skin. UV radiation from a solarium is also more intense than natural sunlight, emitting radiation up to five times as strong as the midday summer sun.

### **Where to get help**

- The Cancer Council Victoria, Tel. 13 11 20
- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre.

### **Things to remember**

- Australia has the highest incidence of skin cancer in the world.
- Both long term exposure to the sun and sunburn cause skin damage that may lead to skin cancer.
- Everyone, no matter what their skin type, is at risk of sun damage and skin cancer.
- Check your skin regularly and see your doctor if you have any unusual spots.

### **Want to know more?**

For references, related links and support group information, go to More information.

### **This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

Cancer Council Victoria

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