



As we finish up another summer season, it is a good time to reflect on the dangers of overexposure to the sun and tanning beds. Over the summer I noticed many of patients taking careful precautions in the sun – and many that did not. The difference is more than just tan lines.

#### WHAT IS A SKIN CANCER?

A skin cancer is a cancer of one of the cells of the skin meaning that these cells starting growing abnormally and without check, thus forming tumors of varying sizes. Skin cancer is divided into 2 groups – melanoma and non-melanoma cancer.

Non-melanoma is the most common and includes basal cell carcinoma (BCC) and squamous cell carcinoma (SCC). Basal cell is more common and typically less serious but still can grow big and happen in sensitive areas such as facial areas of nose, eye and cheek. Squamous cell cancer is less common but is more likely to metastasize or get into lymph nodes and other organs.

Melanoma is a cancer of the melanocyte cell in the skin and is the most serious and deadliest form of skin cancer. Although melanoma accounts for less than 5% of all skin cancer, it is to blame for about 75% of all skin cancer deaths. The American Cancer Society estimates that one American dies each hour from melanoma.

#### A GROWING EPIDEMIC

Skin cancer is the most common cancer – over 3.5 million cases are diagnosed each year in the United States. One in five Americans can expect to develop skin cancer in a lifetime. Of people who live to age 65, 40-50% can be expected to develop at least one skin cancer. The numbers are indeed staggering but there is even more sobering data about skin cancer in young individuals under the age of 40.

Numbers of basal cell skin cancer in women under the age of 40 has more than doubled in the last 30 years while the incidence of squamous cell cancer increased 700% in this age group. Melanoma is a leading cause of cancer for young adults in their 20s. It is the number 2 most common cancer (of all cancers) for young women, and the number 3 most common cancer for young men. The last 30 years have seen a rise in cases of melanoma, with the most rapid increases in young white women and older white men.

A recent study illustrated some trends. In women age under age 40 the melanoma rates in the wealthiest neighborhoods are 6 times greater than those in poorest neighborhoods. Other studies have also found melanoma rates to be highest in people of higher socioeconomic status. One explanation being that wealthier patients can afford more leisure and vacation time, with more sun exposure. Tanning bed exposure is also blamed for the increase in skin cancer.

#### THERE IS NO SAFE TANNING BED

Just one exposure to a tanning bed can increase an individual's chance of skin cancer. People who have used a tanning bed once or more are 74% more likely to develop melanoma. The risk increases with greater use of tanning beds. Those who have used tanning beds for 10 years have double the risk of melanoma. Tanning bed use also increases the risk of basal cell cancer. An average one million Americans visit a tanning bed each day. Over 70% of tanning bed patrons are females aged 16-29 years.

#### GENTLEMEN, DON'T SKIP YOUR SKIN CHECK

The majority of persons diagnosed with melanoma are men over the age of 50. One in 39 Caucasian men will develop melanoma in their lifetimes. National Cancer Institute data show that Caucasian men over age 65 have had an 8.8 percent annual increase in melanoma incidence since 2003 – the highest annual increase of any gender or age group.

Ultraviolet radiation (UVR) from the sun or tanning beds is a well documented carcinogen. Protection from the damaging effects of UVR is essential to maintain healthy, cancer-free skin as we age. We are currently experiencing a skin cancer epidemic with no end in sight. There is no such thing as a safe amount of sun exposure – protect you and your family from the damaging rays of the sun!