

SKIN CANCER: 101

Contributed by Dr. Mary Ann Contogiannis

It is that time of year again: swimming at the beach, lounging by the pool, gardening and many other outdoor activities await you. So what are you doing to protect the largest organ in your body? That's right, your skin is the largest organ you have.

People make lifestyle adjustments for health reasons fairly frequently but neglect their skin. Some folks eat more fiber hoping to stave off colon cancer. Some begin new exercise routines to help their heart; others diet to lower blood pressure. Ask someone to wear sunscreen and they don't have time, or they "need" some color or they purchase whatever is cheapest at the drugstore and continue to use the same bottle for five years.

That is why skin cancer is the most common type of cancer; 1.3 million new cases will be diagnosed this year.

So, here is a "No more Excuses list";

1.
When you tan, you accelerate your skin's natural aging, causing sunspots, as you grow older. Remember, no one ever says, "She has the cutest sunspots";

2.
Not all sunscreens are the same! You NEED a sunscreen with UVA/UVB protection. Using a sunscreen with SPF 25-30 is usually enough unless you already have been diagnosed with a skin cancer, and then you should use a sun block instead. Sunscreens with SPF greater than 30 are usually not true to their claims and not controlled by the FDA so you usually are paying more for a product that is not giving you better protection.

3.
Tanning beds are NOT safer alternatives to sunbathing. The light used in the bed is UVB. Also, that smell that lingers on your skin when you get out of the bed? That is the smell of your body being cooked! That is why if you insist on using them, you can only stay in for a small amount of time.

4.
If you ever had long-term sun exposure, even as a child, then you need to get checked annually for suspicious moles, your primary care doctor or dermatologist can do this.

5.
Protect your children when they are outdoors as the sun exposure we get during our lifetime is cumulative. Even one bad sunburn will increase your chances of developing a skin cancer at some point in your lifetime.

6.

As a rule, when we age into our late 30's and early 40's we begin to see damage to our skin that the years of sunbathing and other sun exposures do to our skin. This can accelerate skin aging causing coarser skin texture, more wrinkles, multiple pigment spots and even areas of hypopigmentation. Some of these can be improved upon but it takes multiple treatments (such as chemical peels, lasers, etc.) to see an improvement and they can return with continued sun exposure.

7.

If you must be bronzed to be happy, consider self-tanning. There are many varieties of self-tanners available today. If you use one, be sure to first use a body exfoliator to prep the skin, the tanner and then a spray-on sealer for best results. Don't forget to wear gloves! There are many spas where the initial treatment can be applied for you and then you are given a kit to take home for touch ups.

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