

LOCAL HEALTH TALK

Skin Cancer Screening

May is melanoma awareness month. Have you had your skin checked?

Melanoma, along with other common types of skin cancers, is on the rise in the United States with new cases estimated to total over 60,000 in 2006. Melanoma is a cancer of the pigment producing cells of the skin and may appear within a mole or in previously normal skin. Melanoma can occur on any area of the body, but is most prevalent in sun-exposed areas.

Melanoma can affect anyone, of any age or skin color, however the risks are increased by light hair, light eyes, and blistering sunburns. Having a family history of melanoma is also a risk factor. Melanoma can be a life-threatening disease, as it is capable of metastasizing to other organs in the body. Although melanoma accounts for only about 4% of all skin cancers, it is responsible for close to 80% of deaths related to skin cancers.

An important way in which the risk of melanoma can be reduced is by smart sun practices such as avoiding the intense midday sun and wearing protective clothing, wide brimmed hats, sunglasses, and sunscreen. The best chance for cure of melanoma is by early detection. The thinnest, earliest form of melanoma, called melanoma-in-situ, is virtually 100% curable with simple surgical removal. Self skin checks can be life saving, and only take a few minutes. A recent study showed that individuals identify their own melanomas more often than their physician, spouse, or partner. Furthermore, self detected melanomas are on average less advanced. This is not a surprise in that every individual has the greatest opportunity to exam-



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ine their own skin. These facts strongly support the importance of self examination in the early detection and cure of melanoma.

To perform a skin self-examination look at all of your skin from head to toe, using a hand mirror to help with hard to see areas. Check for moles that have changed in size, shape or color. While examining your moles for irregular features, it is useful to think about the ABCD rules of melanoma. A is for asymmetry. Watch for moles in which one half does not

match the other. B is for borders. Look for moles with irregular or notched borders. C is for color. Moles with multiple or changing colors may be abnormal. D is for diameter. The rule of thumb is to watch for any moles that are greater than 6mm in diameter (about the size of a pencil eraser). This is based on the fact that most melanomas are greater than 6mm when diagnosed, but may be smaller. A mole that has atypical features should be evaluated, regardless of size. In addition, watch for moles that simply look different from your others. If you find anything worrisome, report it to your dermatologist for further evaluation.

In May and throughout the spring and summer, dermatologists across the country are offering free skin cancer screenings. This is a great opportunity to have a trained eye alert you to any potential problems and provide information about skin cancer. Contact your local dermatologist to find about skin cancer screenings in your area.

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