

Michelle Tarbox, M.D.

What causes skin cancer?

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There are actually many things that contribute to the development of skin cancer. But the most important factor and the one we have the most control over is how much UV radiation our skin is exposed to over the course of our lifetime. A lot of skin exposure to the sun happens during childhood and adolescence. And there used to be a very discouraging statistic that would say you'd had 90% of your sun exposure by the time you were 20 years old. So a lot of people who are adults would just feel like well, all the damage is done, I guess I'll just give up now. But the truth of the matter is those statistics were kind of relooked at and people have thought about that question since that time, and it's really proportionate to the amount of life that you lived, how much sun exposure you get, especially with our current sun exposure habits. So really emphasizing good sun protection to all of our patients is the strategy that we use to help improve the protection of their skin from the sun but also decrease the risk of skin cancer development.

Are there any other things that may increase your risk?

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Other things that contribute to skin cancer are genetics, you can learn about that through your family history, certain kinds of pollutants can potentially increase skin cancer, as can certain medications, so you can discuss with your doctor if you're on any medications that increase that risk of skin cancer.

Is it easy to detect?

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In the hands of an experienced dermatologist, most skin cancer is very easy to detect and treat. And the great news is that most skin cancers when they're found and treated early, don't have any kind of demand on the rest of that person's life beyond a scar and maybe some more frequent visits with their dermatologist. It's when skin cancer goes undetected that it can become very dangerous to the patient and even cost them their life.

What are some recognizable symptoms?

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Any skin spot that is bleeding, changing on its own has developed tenderness or itching, or has changed colors is something you should bring to the attention of your doctor. These are potential warning signs of skin cancer development. If you think about it, on the basis of skin cancer in the way that it's growing, it's growing out of control. A lot of skin to cancer tumors actually outgrow their own blood supply, which is one of the reasons they can ulcerate and bleed. It's also one of the causes for discomfort associated with those lesions. Our immune system also pays attention and notices when we have a skin cancer and so we can get redness

Michelle Tarbox, M.D.

and itching around the lesion as well. That doesn't mean that every itchy spot is skin cancer. But if something has an unusual symptom, for sure, bring it to the attention of your physician.

What are some common misconceptions about skin cancer?

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common misconceptions about skin cancer are that it can't happen to me, that's probably the most common skin cancer. incorrect assumption anybody can get skin cancer if you have skin, you can get skin cancer on it. Even the parts of our skin that never see the sun can rarely develop skin cancer, which is one of the reasons that both at home exams of your own skin as well as professional exams through your physician are a very good idea to prevent any kind of bad outcomes from skin cancer.

Does someone with darker skin have less risk of skin cancer?

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Our patients who have darker skin we call those photo types in dermatology, and they range from one which is very light complected usually with very light hair and light eye color. Those patients that just can't be in the sun or they burn immediately. All the way to six which are patients who have the most deeply pigmented skin. our patients that have more deeply pigmented skin do have better protection against skin cancer and solar radiation. But it isn't perfect protection. And it is something that we need to disseminate awareness about. There have been some great efforts on the part of some leaders, of patients that are people of color, discussing their own diagnoses of skin cancer and bringing awareness to the fact that people who are not the lightest Caucasians can still get skin cancer and they need to be checked and treated properly. Patients who are African American have a specific category of risk on the palms and soles called Acral lentiginous melanoma. This is a kind of melanoma that can grow undetected on those parts of the body. Not all of us look at frequently, especially the bottoms of the feet. It actually famously took the life of Bob Marley, who was of course a famous reggae musician and an avid soccer player. Unfortunately, initially, the lesion on the large toe of the right foot was misconstrued as a bruise for some period of time. And then once the melanoma was discovered, it was very advanced and difficult to treat. So this is the kind of thing you want to detect early. If you're getting a skin exam and the feet are not being looked at. You want to make sure that you make those available to the physician to examine because it's best for us to examine the entire body at once.

What are some places on the body that people may not realize can develop skin cancer?

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Places that can get skin cancer that people don't always think about are those hidden places. Our scalp for example, is a place we can get skin cancer. I think every single one of us that's been out long enough in the summer has probably had the experience of at least getting very

Michelle Tarbox, M.D.

hot on the top of our scalp if not having a sunburn on the top of our scalp. So even though most of us If you're fortunate to have hair to protect ourselves, some of us will have a part line that allows access to the scalp for the UV radiation. Or we might have lighter colored hair that doesn't really protect that well, or we might have hair that gets a little bit thinner. And that's not giving us greater protection, especially after the COVID pandemic, we've had more patients with stress related hair loss, and those patients can also have an increased risk of skin cancer on the scalp. So protecting the scalp with a good hat, or sunscreen is very important. Some of the spray sunscreens work well on the scalp, you do want to make sure it doesn't cause any irritation. Other places that patients can forget about or not know that can make skin cancer, or unusual places like the back of the eye. And then every fold on the body back of the years that fold behind the ears is a place lots of skin cancers like to tuck themselves in. And sometimes people will get a sore place from wearing their eyeglasses, that's actually a symptom of skin cancer in that location. Similarly, people can even get skin cancer in their nails, and in their groin areas. So those are all important areas to examine and report any changes that you're concerned about to your doctor.

Why are skin cancer screenings and self-checks important and how can someone perform a self-check?

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I like everybody to get familiar with the skin they're in some people are a little afraid of their own bodies, but it is your body, it's the only thing that goes through your entire life with you. And I want people to learn to love and take care of that very special place that they call home for their entire time here on Earth. So I ask my patients after a bath or a shower when they're feeling nice and comfortable to go ahead and take a look at all the surfaces of their skin. Looking in a mirror is very helpful, especially to examine parts of the body, we can't turn our head to see properly. So looking in the mirror with a hand mirror, and angling that so you can see your own back can at least help you to detect for changes. Now if I have patients that are fortunate enough to have a buddy at home, we'll often do discussion of having partners help us to check things and even just take photographs so that those can be looked at over time. A hand mirror can really facilitate a skin exam, as can having a friendly partner help you out. But I think a really important thing to emphasize is that patients shouldn't be afraid to examine their own skin, you want to get in all the nooks and crannies and make sure nothing's hiding away that needs to be detected. And just make friends with it. It's part of your body, it's part of your life and you want to take the very best care of it because it's the one garment you wear for the entire time.

Should UV lamps be a concern?

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So some of the light curing devices that are used in nail salons, some of those have UV bulbs in them. And those UV bulbs are just tiny versions of the low pressure mercury lamps that are in traditional tanning beds. So there is some risk with that exposure. I would discuss with your nail professional if you're using a UV lamp or an LED, there are some blue LEDs that are used now to

Michelle Tarbox, M.D.

cure the gels. And those tend to not emit significant UV radiation. So a good rule of thumb is if the light source is like very tiny and not producing a lot of heat, generally, those don't have the UV radiation but always ask the person who's using the device. And if you're not comfortable putting a little sunscreen on the back of the hand, or even letting the nails dry by air, if that's a type of preparation that's amenable to that type of curing is reasonable to consider