

Wellness Ways

The Methodist Hospital, Corporate Wellness • 713.441.5978 • www.methodistcorporatewellness.com

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Protect Your Body's Largest Organ

What organ in your body can weigh up to 9 pounds and cover 2 square yards if stretched out flat? Here's a hint: it's flexible and ever-changing – just like our lives. Keeping it healthy is essential to living.

Answer? Our skin. From the thinnest layer of skin on our eyelids to the tough thick skin on the bottoms of our feet, skin – the body's largest organ – protects our bones, muscles, arteries and other vital organs.

Yet we abuse it constantly through overexposure to the sun and other elements, harsh cleaning fluids and around-the-clock demands. The World Health Organization estimates up to 90 percent of melanomas can be directly linked to too much sun, and the disease kills more than 60,000 people a year worldwide.

Remember these healthy skin rules this summer:

- Wear sunscreens with sun protection factors (SPFs) of 15 or higher – some brands now carry 30-50 SPFs. Reapply frequently if exercising or swimming. Waterproof claims on the bottles are not guarantees.
- Limit direct exposure to the sun during the most intense times from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
- Wear a hat with a brim and protective clothing when in the sun for long periods of time.
- Wear quality sunglasses – ultraviolet rays can harm your eyes. Glasses should promise to block ultraviolet radiation.
- The American Cancer society urges people to avoid sunlamps and tanning beds because they deliver ultraviolet rays that can damage the skin.
- Do monthly full-body checks – without your clothes – to look for any unusual changes in your body's largest organ. New moles, moles with changing characteristics and irritable spots that don't seem to heal should be examined by a doctor.

No Such Thing as a "Healthy Tan"

While some cancer rates are stabilizing or even decreasing because of heightened awareness, better screenings and earlier treatment, one form of cancer in the United States continues to rise. Each year more than 1 million Americans are diagnosed with skin cancer and the disease maintains its title as the most common form of cancer in the country.

The Skin Cancer Foundation estimates one in five Americans will develop some form of skin cancer in their lifetime. But a recent survey co-sponsored by the foundation shows reason for hope. Americans may finally be getting the message there's no such thing as "a healthy tan."

About 53 percent of 1,000 people interviewed said they don't feel they look better with a tan. And even more promising is our changing perceptions – 63 percent said they are not more attracted to tanned people. Recognizing the risk suntans carry is important to changing our behaviors and attitudes in the sun.

Up to 90 percent of skin cancers are caused by repeated sun overexposure. It's no surprise that the head, face, ears, hands, shoulders, backs, necks and forearms are among the body parts most commonly affected by skin cancers. But they can also occur on areas of the body not touched by the sun, which is one reason doctors recommend checking your entire body in a full-length mirror monthly.

Risk factors for skin cancer include: fair skin; red or blond hair; light-colored eyes; easily sunburned skin; more than five sunburns; numerous moles or freckles; and a family history of the disease. White men over 50 represent the majority of melanoma cases diagnosed today, but women under 40 have seen the various types of skin cancers skyrocket in the last three decades. It is a non-discriminatory disease.

The earlier skin cancer is detected, the easier it is to treat and the more curable it is.

Skin cancers come in different forms. Melanomas, the more dangerous but less common form of the disease, can spread rapidly to different parts of the body making treatment more difficult. It can pop up anywhere but is seen more frequently on the trunks of male patients and on women's legs.

The most common skin cancers are non-melanomas, which include squamous cell and basal cell cancers.

They develop from different skin cells than melanomas and appear more frequently on the head and neck. People who work in the sun or spend much of their time outdoors are more susceptible to non-melanomas. These growths can grow large and create scarring and disfigurement if left untreated.



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Skin cancer screenings and an annual skin exam with your physician should be part of your regular health checkups. Screenings can take as little as 10 minutes for rapid inspection of exposed areas like the arms, hands, face and neck. Full body screenings and closer inspections are recommended annually.

For more information or to schedule a checkup, please call Methodist Wellness Services at 713-441-5978 or visit www.methodisthealth.com/wellness.

Important to Know the ABCDs of Skin Cancer

Distinctive moles often make the face, adding character and individuality to each of us. We all have them. Most are harmless and look the same for a lifetime, never varying their size, shape or color and sometimes just fading away with age.

The changing face of a mole, however, is cause for concern. Remember the ABCD rule when conducting full-body skin cancer inspections in a mirror.

- **Asymmetry:** If one side of a mole doesn't match the other side, it is asymmetrical and should be checked.
- **Border:** Guard your moles' borders. If the edges are not well-defined and appear ragged or blurred, go to your doctor.
- **Color:** Moles should have a consistent color. If a mole starts to show hints of red, white, blue, brown or black, get it checked.
- **Diameter:** Moles are small. If they are one-quarter inch and growing, schedule a checkup.

New growths on the body, non-healing sores and redness or swelling around a mole are also reasons for suspicion. If your doctor shares your concerns, he or she will check further through a skin biopsy to determine if cancer is present. The most important advice in catching skin cancer early is to know your own skin, monitor changes regularly and see your doctor at the first sign of skin irregularities.



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