

Melanoma and Sunscreen

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What is Melanoma?

Melanoma is a form of skin cancer that is caused by an uncontrolled overgrowth of our own skin cells, called melanocytes. The natural function of melanocytes is to make a substance called melanin that protects the top layer of the skin. Melanomas typically form around moles in the face, head or neck region. Advanced stages of melanoma can spread to organs and are responsible for up to 70 percent of deaths related to skin cancer. If detected early, treatment is often successful.

What Causes Melanoma?

The most important risk factor that can cause melanoma is exposure to the sun's UVA and UVB rays. Five or more moderate to severe sunburns in a lifetime can double the risk of melanoma. Other risk factors consist of sunburns early in life up to the ages of 10-18 years old, use of tanning beds, fair skin and hair, genetic problems and immune system problems that weaken the body's defense against harmful damage from the sun.

Prevention

One of the most important steps in the prevention of melanoma is the daily use of sunscreen. Sunscreen blocks the sun's UVA and UVB rays from damaging the skin. It is recommended to apply sunscreen 30 minutes before going outside, especially to areas with the most sun exposure (head, face, neck and arms). Reapply often, especially after swimming and exercising outside. Regardless of the how strong the sun is, it still emits UVA and UVB rays; thus it is recommended that sunscreen be applied every day to areas that are exposed. In addition, the reflection of the sun's rays off of the snow and water penetrates the skin deeper than when it hits the skin directly. When choosing a sunscreen, pay attention to the amount of sun protection factor (SPF) that is in the sunscreen. Always



choose an SPF that is greater than or equal to SPF 15. SPF 15 will block 93 percent of the sun's rays from penetrating the skin, and an SPF of greater than 15 will block more of the skin's rays from penetrating.

Children greater than six months old should wear a sunscreen with an SPF between 15-30. A product containing zinc oxide is recommended because it will cause the sun's rays to scatter, as well as decrease penetration into the skin. In children younger than six months old, sun block methods are highly encouraged. Sun blocks should be physical materials like clothing and hats that stop the sun from reaching the skin.

Skin Self-Checks

Frequent self-checks of the skin are important to detect a change in old and new moles. Self-checks are best to follow the ABCD rule.

- A. Asymmetry:** Check that all sides of the mole look the same and are the same size.
- B. Border:** The sides of moles should not be jagged, uneven or faded.
- C. Color:** Moles should be all one color and not different shades of black, brown or tan.
- D. Diameter:** The diameter of moles should not be greater than six millimeters.

Other warning signs include itching, pain, bleeding, oozing or ulceration from any mole.

If you experience any of these signs and/or symptoms, contact your healthcare provider for further evaluation. It is important to remember that early stages of melanoma are often treated successfully, while advanced stages can be difficult to treat.

For more information, ask your pharmacist!

This information provided by Michigan Pharmacists Association and: