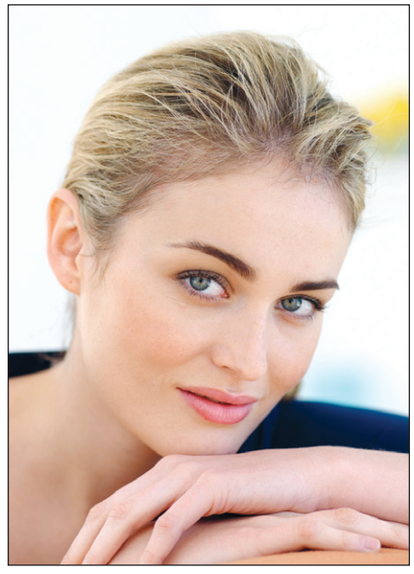
Skin cancer a concern no matter the season

Skin cancer can affect anyone, and overexposure to the sun, a key risk factor for skin cancer, can occur at any time of year. Whether it is a hot, sultry day spent by the pool or a chilly day skiing the slopes, any exposure to the sun can result in skin damage that can increase a person's risk for skin cancer. Plus, certain areas of the body are more susceptible than others.



Adults and even children are susceptible to skin cancer when spending time outdoors.

How does skin cancer form?

When DNA, the material that encodes genetic information in all cells of the body, is damaged and the body cannot repair that damage, a person's risk for cancer increases. Damaged cells begin to grow and divide uncontrollably. Damaged skin cells that divide and spread can cause skin cancer. Because skin cancer tumors generally form in the outer-most layer of the skin known as the epidermis, skin cancer may be more readily apparent and detectable than many other cancers in the early stages.

The American Academy of Dermatology says that 1 in 5 Americans will develop some form of skin cancer in their lifetime, while the Canadian Skin Cancer Foundation says that basal cell carcinoma, the most common form of skin cancer, affects 50,000 to 60,000 Canadians each year.

Where is skin cancer most likely to appear?

Skin cancer is most likely to appear on the areas of the body most exposed to the sun. These include the head, face, neck, arms, and legs. Those who are bald or balding can also have skin cancer appear on their scalp. But skin cancer can develop anywhere on the body where there is skin, which makes it important to routinely check all areas of the body for indicators of the disease.

A recent study by The Mayo Clinic found that, while skin cancer can affect anyone, young women are more likely to receive a diagnosis. The study indicated that melanoma, the most serious type of skin cancer, has increased by eight times for women under the age of 40 since 1970. Even children can get skin cancer. A study in the journal Pediatrics found that the number of cases of skin cancer among children and adolescents has been increasing each year by about 2 percent.

Types of skin cancer

There are three main types of skin cancer. They include basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma, and melanoma.

• Basal cell carcinoma occurs in the basal cells, which are the lowest level of the epidermis. It can appear as a shiny translucent or pearly nodule, a sore that continuously heals and then reopens, a pink slightly elevated growth, reddish irritated patches of skin, or a waxy scar.

• Squamous cell carcinoma occurs in the upper layer of the epidermis. It often looks like a crusty, red patch of skin.

• Melanoma begins in the melanocytes, the cells in the epidermis that give the skin its color. Melanoma is the most deadly form of skin cancer because it can quickly spread into the lymph system of the body and organs. Melanoma can form in a preexisting mole or form a new mole.

Causes of skin cancer

Exposure to sunlight is the leading cause of skin cancer, according to the American Cancer Society. While the rays of the sun may be more intense during the summertime, any exposure to the sun can lead to skin cancer. The sun can reflect off of snow and become concentrated. No matter how many layers a person wears during cooler weather, the head and neck area tends to remain exposed to the sun's damaging UV radiation year-round.

Skin cancer is most likely to occur in people with pale skin who have a tendency to burn or freckle when exposed to the sun. But everyone should be diligent and cover up when spending time outdoors.

No one is immune to skin cancer, and the change of seasons does not lower a person's risk of getting the disease. Anytime a person is in the sun he or she runs the risk of UV exposure that can lead to skin cancer, which highlights the importance of taking preventive measures to safeguard yourself from skin cancer.