

Skin Cancer

UV is still a risk on a cool, cloudy day

Many of us don't give the prospect of developing skin cancer a second thought. Maybe that has a lot to do with believing the various myths about the disease:

- ⊗ You can't get sunburnt on a cool or cloudy day.
- ⊗ A fake tan protects the skin from UV exposure.
- ⊗ Sunscreen is unnecessary when using cosmetics.
- ⊗ People with olive skins won't get skin cancer.
- ⊗ You need lots of sun to prevent vitamin D deficiency.
- ⊗ Those who tan but don't burn need not bother with sun protection.
- ⊗ Tinted car windows completely block UV rays.
- ⊗ Skin cancer is easy to see and isn't a problem to treat.

None of the above are true. Certainly, we all need to maintain a healthy level of vitamin D, and the best natural sources are UV rays from the sun; but how much is too much? According to the Cancer Council of Australia, a short time on a daily basis provides most people with sufficient vitamin D. Suitable activities might include occasional gardening, or a walk to the shops and back. Prolonged exposure to the sun without adequate protection is not recommended.

Here in Australia, skin cancer is a risk we take seriously. Because of our climate and geographical location, we have the highest rate of skin cancer in the world. 770,000 cases are treated every year, and approximately 2000 people die from the disease annually. The risk in other countries will vary depending on the amount of sun each day; but it is worth bearing in mind that UV rays can still penetrate some cloud. The safest level is 3 or below; anything above can be dangerous, especially for those having an above-average susceptibility.

If you fall into one or more of the categories below, your risk of developing skin cancer from UV exposure is increased. Do you have:

- Fair-skin, burn easily and do not tan?
- Blue or green eyes, and fair or red hair?
- A history of past sunburn, particularly as a child?
- A large number of freckles, moles or sunspots?
- A family or personal history of skin cancer?
- To work or spend a good amount of leisure time out in the sun?

If you aren't one of these people, it doesn't mean you don't need to be careful in the sun. Everyone should take precautions to avoid over-exposure to UV rays. They are there, whether you realise it or not. Unlike infra red which are hot, ultra violet rays can't be felt, only the damage they cause; and by then it is too late. Wearing long-sleeved shirts and long pants is good, provided the material is a reasonably close weave. Holding it up to the light is a fair test – if it shines through, even as tiny pin-pricks, there's every chance it won't provide much protection. As for T shirts when swimming, unless they are Lycra or similar, once they get wet, their effectiveness to deflect UV rays is drastically reduced.

Always wear a hat with a wide brim – baseball caps are useless – and don't forget sun glasses to protect the eyes. Those parts of the body which aren't covered, such as face, ears, hands and arms should have some kind of sun block applied – and that's 20 minutes before going out into the sun; with further applications every two hours; and immediately after swimming, sweating, or towelling. Sunscreen that has an SPF 30+ rating is the way to go, and plenty of it, especially for children. Don't imagine that using an SPF 50+ means better protection for longer. It lasts the same amount of time and its filtering properties are only about 1.3% more than the 30+. Neither give 100% protection; and the use of either isn't a safe licence to spend all day in the sun.

Another misconception is shade. Of course being in a shady spot is preferable to open exposure to the sun; but a lot depends on the kind of shade, and what else is around that might reduce its effectiveness. You can get burnt from sunlight filtering through trees. Even if the sun can't penetrate a heavy overhead protection, there is still a risk from reflected UV rays bouncing off fences, concrete, sand, sea and other bodies of water like lakes.

Because this threat is all around and almost impossible to avoid, everyone is at risk of skin cancer. Regularly checking for signs on the body is important. A spot on the skin that hangs around and changes in some way is one. Sores that are crusty and won't seem to heal could be a problem. Small lumps that are red, pale or a pearly colour are also warnings; as are any new spots, freckles or moles that change size, shape or colour over a period of weeks to months. These are the signs that need referring to your doctor for inspection. With luck, they will prove to be nothing to worry about; but if there is the possibility of skin cancer, it's best discovered early. Then there's a better chance that treatment will be successful.

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