

Here comes the sun!

Tips to avoid long term skin problems; when to see a doctor.
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We are having a fantastic summer so far - I must qualify that I am writing this on the 21st of June, it is bright and sunny outside and the temperature is an amazing 27 deg C. When you read this it may well be a different story, knowing the unpredictability of our weather.

The cream I have is a middle of the price range and one that is very water resistant as I swim outdoors a lot. I tend to use the ones for kids and very high sun protection factor (SPF). This one is 50+ which supposedly only allows a 50th of the UV radiation through, with 5 UVA stars – maximum rating.

Tanning is not a bad thing. It is the body's response to increase ultraviolet radiation, producing darker melanin and more melanin and protecting the cells from damage. A bit of sun on the skin is also good to produce vitamin D, and makes us feel better.

The problem is too much sun, too strong and too often. This causes genetic changes in the skin cells and ages the skin. Some people don't tan well, they burn. Over time or with repeated skin damage, the cells change and can become damaged, causing flaky reddish patches (Actinic keratoses) particularly on the face and other exposed areas eg. Arms and legs. These can occasionally turn to skin cancer.

Skin cancers are of three main varieties:

1. **BCC or basal cell carcinoma**, also known as rodent ulcers are very common, they tend to affect sun exposed areas and are usually slow growing pink / reddish spots or patches that can crust and bleed. They are usually easily cured unless neglected for years. They don't spread to other places but can be tricky to remove, for example near the eyes.
2. **SCCs or squamous cell carcinomas** are more likely to affect those over 70 years of age, probably with existing sun damage, and they tend to be like a fast growing fleshy wart, often tender. Face, scalp and back of hands are common. They can occur when there is an ulcer that does not heal. They can spread, but usually are cured when removed in a timely fashion.
3. **Melanomas** are the really nasty skin cancers. They are usually brown or black, but not always, particularly in red haired or very fair people when they can be pinkish. I've even seen a purple one.

Lots of sun exposure, repeated burning and having lots of 'atypical' moles are known risk factors. Clearly having a history of melanoma in the family increases the risk too.

Melanoma can appear anywhere in the body, but the trunk is the most common place, so if you have a partner or friend, check their back from time to time. If caught early they can be easily cured by removing them, but they do spread to other organs, sometimes quickly, and sometimes they are caught late.

In the UK, melanoma is diagnosed at a mean age of around 50 years but a fifth of cases occur in young adults and as a result it has a large impact in terms of years of life lost. **Over the last 30 years the incidence of melanoma has increased more than for any other common cancer in the UK. Lifetime risk of 1 in 60.**

The thing to look out for is change in a mole – change in size, change in shape and change in colour. We also use the “ABC” rule when checking a mole:-

A for Asymmetry

B for irregular Border

C for Colour (the more colours the more concerned one would be).

So do seek advice early if you feel something is not right with your skin and remember the Australian health campaign ‘Slip, Slop, Slap’ is probably the best slogan to remember in preventing problems.

Slip on a shirt, Slop on the 30+ sunscreen, Slap on a hat, Seek shade or shelter, Slide on some sunnies (sun glasses). — "Slip, Slop, Slap, Seek, Slide"

I am raising money for melanoma research in primary care via the local charity Melanoma Focus. I am doing an English Channel swim in August.

This money will go to projects designed to prevent melanoma and pick them up early in General Practice. It will fund Dr Fiona Walters research at Strangeways laboratories in Cambridge, who has already worked with local surgeries and patients over the last 10 years or so. It is really important research to avoid unnecessary suffering and deaths.

My page: <http://uk.virginmoneygiving.com/MigArbide>