



Sue Ann Says: Be smart in the sun this summer

I was a teenage sun goddess, slathering myself with baby oil and slowly sautéing under the sun's benevolent beam. My daughters too did their share of sun worshipping. Today, I'm scaring the willies out of my grandkids with my lectures about sun and skin cancer. And if I ever catch them – or their parents – using a tanning bed, they're grounded for life.

A deep tan isn't glamorous. It isn't healthy. Any sun exposure that changes the color of our skin can damage the DNA of our skin cells. Sun overexposure literally can kill.

I know this through sad personal experience: my brother died of melanoma, a malignant skin cancer.

Yet even with all the research and health awareness campaigns, the incidence of melanoma in the U.S. is increasing faster than any cancer.

What is melanoma?

The sun's ultraviolet rays cause a host of skin damage, from premature wrinkling to skin cancers. Melanoma is cancer of the melanocytes, our pigment-producing cells. Moles are caused by a clustering of melanocytes. Most are harmless. But sometimes these cells become cancerous. Melanoma can begin as a new mole or occur in a mole that has been present for years.

"The biggest misconception about skin cancer is that it's a cosmetic issue," explained Mark Albertini, MD, a melanoma researcher with the University of Wisconsin's Comprehensive Cancer Center. "Unlike other skin cancers, malignant melanoma spreads through the blood stream and lymph system. Left untreated, the cancer can spread to the lungs, liver, brain, and other organs."

Dr. Albertini told me that early detection is crucial. The cure rate is about 90 percent when melanoma is less than one millimeter deep, only 50 percent curable when the melanoma is four millimeters deep.

Are you at risk?

Exposure to the sun's ultraviolet rays (UV-A and UV-B) is the greatest risk factor. Melanoma is caused by short, intense UV exposure, placing those who have had more than two severe, blistering sunburns by late adolescence at increased risk. It also is caused by cumulative exposure over time. People who live in a climate with more sunlight are at greater risk. Those with fair skin, lighter eyes, and blonde or red hair are at greater risk because their skin reacts more strongly to UV exposure.

About one in 10 people diagnosed with melanoma have a family history. A first degree relative with melanoma increases the risk by 50 percent.

The more moles you have, the higher chance of developing melanoma. And if you have ever had any kind of skin cancer, you're more likely to develop melanoma.

The ABCs of melanoma

See your doctor immediately if you notice a mole with any of these warning signs:

- A: asymmetry
- B: irregular border
- C: color (black, or brown; also pink, red, white, blue or purple)
- D: diameter larger than head of a pencil eraser
- E: evolving, changing mole or elevated mole
- A mole that doesn't look like others

Dr. Albertini recommends a monthly head-to-toe skin self-exam. Ask a friend to check your scalp and other areas you can't see; then return the favor. Check your children carefully each month. Also ask your physician for a thorough skin exam at every annual check-up. My doctor even peeks between my toes!

If you are at increased risk, see a dermatologist regularly. Also consult a dermatologist immediately if you are pregnant and find a new or changing mole.

Sun safe tips

"People often view sunscreen as a protective shield and assume they can safely stay in the sun all day," Dr. Albertini told me. "Sunscreen is only a partial protection. It must be combined with a comprehensive strategy to defend against dangerous UV exposure." Dr. Albertini's tips:

- Apply sunscreen to your entire body 30 minutes before going outside. Reapply every two hours. Use sunscreens with UV-A and UV-B protection, at least SPF 15.
- Stick to the shade between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.
- Remember that 80 percent of the sun's rays penetrate clouds.

- Wear a broad-brimmed hat, protective clothing and UV-blocking sunglasses. (Melanoma also can occur in the eye.)
- Keep newborns out of the sun. Use appropriate sunscreens on babies six months and older.
- Don't use tanning salons! "They should have the same warning labels we have on cigarette packs," Dr. Albertini says.
- Ask your doctor if you are taking medications that increase your risk of damaging sun exposure.

I have spoken in previous columns about our Vitamin D needs and how the sun can help. Dr. Albertini explains Vitamin D needs should be readily met with "rational" sun exposure. Therefore, realize that intentional UV overexposure and sunburns do not meet this requirement.

Like most Wisconsinites, I live for summer and beach, baseball, and backyard barbecues. So I'm going to get out there and enjoy. I hope you will too. Just be smart about it. Make sun safety a habit, and encourage family and friends to do the same. Because it all begins with a healthy woman.

Yours in good health,

Sue Ann Thompson
Founder & President
Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation

The Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF) is a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF presents women's health education and outreach programs, funds women's health research, provides scholarships for women in academic medicine, and publishes resource materials. Your donations help the Foundation reach women all over Wisconsin with the information, resources and tools they need to be healthy. To make a donation or to learn more about WWHF visit www.wwhf.org or call 1-800-448-5148.