



risky rays

Sunshine can be
hazardous
to your health

By MEG BARONE
Correspondent

twenty six-year-old Danielle Lynk is a sun worshiper, bathing frequently in the solar rays. And nothing comes between Lynk and her tan, not protective creams, not even warnings from the medical community about the risks of developing skin cancer. "I'm not wearing anything, no oil or sunscreen or anything," the Milford woman said Monday at Gulf Beach. "I've never experienced it, so it's not a concern for me," Lynk said.

She's got plenty of company. People young and old, male and female, fair-skinned and dark are soaking up the sun naturally and in tanning beds, exposing themselves to damaging ultraviolet A and B rays.

"I like the way I look when I'm tan. I never put anything on," said Emma Menesello, owner of the Hair Chateau in Hamden. "Every break I get I go in the sun," she said, sunning herself recently outside her salon.

"I'm sure it's bad but so far, at 55, I have no symptoms of anything. I never burn. I never get blisters," said the olive-skinned Menesello.

The quest for that healthy glow could cost them their looks, and worse yet, their health down the road, experts say. Sun damage is cumulative and problems usually manifest later in life.

"The majority of the sun damage that we're all walking around with happened in our first 18 years of life," said Lisa Topham, a registered nurse with her own skin rejuvenation center in Norwalk.

"We know that the risk of developing skin cancer is mainly linked to people who had bad, blistering burns in childhood," said Dr. Dorothea Wild, an internist at Griffin



Nurse Lisa Topham, left, and plastic surgeon Dr. Rick Rosen of the Skin Rejuvenation Center in Norwalk talk with Mary Ellen Hunes of Westport, who is planning to undergo treatment for her sun-damaged skin.

Tracy Deeri/Connecticut Post

Hospital in Derby, who is also board certified in preventive medicine.

"It may not happen for 25 years or longer, but it might well happen," said Dr. Hervey Weitzman, an oncologist at St. Vincent's Medical Center in Bridgeport.

Then again, medical professionals are beginning to see in younger people increased rates of skin cancers — basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma, and melanoma, the deadliest form.

"Melanoma is increasing in general throughout the world," Weitzman said.

Melanoma, a cancer often marked by irregular spots on the skin that can spread if left untreated, kills close to 8,000 people each year, although it is considered preventable and curable if caught early.

Although most people diagnosed with melanoma are white men over the age of 50, skin cancer is showing up more and more among women and young people, according to the Skin

AN OUNCE OF PROTECTION

- Limit sun exposure
- Avoid the sun during its peak intensity between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m.
- Don't get burned, especially not to the point of peeling or blistering
- See a doctor if you have a changing mole on your skin, especially if it's black in color or ulcerates and bleeds
- Use sunblock, not sunscreen
- Wear long sleeves
- Wear a hat

Experts: Years of abuse have led to increase in skin cancer

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Cancer Foundation.

In the past three decades, skin cancer rates have tripled in women under 40, and cases of pediatric melanoma have doubled in the last 20 years.

"Malignant melanoma can metastasize to other parts of the body and can become fatal," said Topham, who, 21 years ago, was in nursing school and working with a dermatologist.

"Back then we were removing skin cancer from

people who were in their 60s, 70s,

80s. Now I am diagnosing and we are treating people with skin cancers in their 30s, 40s, 50s," Topham said.

Basal cell and squamous are curable. They comprise the majority of skin cancers. "And once you've had one of those you have an 80 percent chance of developing another one," Topham said.

Treatment depends on the type and stage of skin cancer, and includes removal of the mole or growth, possible reconstructive surgery, interferon or chemotherapy.

People at greatest risk are those with fair skin, red hair, freckles, and those that burn rather than tan, but no one is completely immune to the sun's damage, Wild said.

"We know that even black people get melanoma," she said. "Many more people are being

diagnosed with skin cancers at a much earlier age because of what I believe are the biggest factors — we are destroying our ozone layer, tanning beds, and people don't know the difference between sunscreen and sunblock," Topham said.

"People think 'I can put on an SPF 15 and I'll be fine.' Today putting on a 15 is practically useless," she said.

Sunscreens only protect the skin's surface from UVA rays, but do not keep equally harmful UVB rays from penetrating the skin. Only sunblock with zinc oxide or titanium dioxide can do that.

"I'm not suggesting people change their lifestyle. But you can do it intelligently. Everyone should be using a sunblock. I'm outside all the time. I sail, I ride horses. But I wear a sunblock," Topham said.

Gerry Nichols, of Milford, a registered nurse at Norwalk Hospital, who was diagnosed with all three types of skin cancer in 2003, thinks lotions are impractical and provide a false sense of security. They aren't effective if people don't reapply them frequently, he said.

"Apart from on your nose, [lotions] are a waste of time... The answer is to have sun protection factor clothing, neck to ankle if you can," said Nichols, who also wears a hat. Many manufacturers are

Sunscreen myths

Dermatologists say that some common myths about sun protection sometimes thwart their advice to patients about using sunscreen.

Myth: SPF over 15 is overkill
SPF 30 and higher sunscreen protects skin significantly better than SPF 15; high SPF compensates for sweating, water washing off lotion and using too little

Myth: Sunscreens deteriorate in a year
Unless sunscreen lotion turns rancid, it keeps for several years; shake up an older sunscreen before use

Myth: Cloudy days and being in the water
make sunscreen unnecessary
Up to 80 percent of ultraviolet light penetrates clouds; up to 50 percent penetrates water

Myth: Sunscreen causes overheating during exercise
In an experiment, 22 men exercised vigorously wearing heavy sunscreen; their skin was cooler than when exercising without sunscreen

Myth: Clothing or hats are as good as sunscreen
Loose fabrics transmit up to 30 percent of UV, and wet fabrics even more; baseball cap brims are too small to protect well

Source: The Physician and Sportsmedicine
Graphic: Paul Trap and Helen Lee McCormac

cancer six years later.

"The sun is definitely not my friend," said Fahmley, who nonetheless spends most of her time outdoors. Her clothes are virtually weightless — on average three ounces per article — and allow the body to perspire freely, unlike waterproof sunblocks, and block 98 percent of UV rays.

While one of Fahmley's skin cancers appeared on her face, the other was on her thigh, which is not uncommon.

The face, neck and hands, which experience more sun exposure, are at higher risk, but cancerous growths can develop elsewhere, Wild said.

"Any skin lesion anywhere on the body that fits the risk criteria — that is irregular, that bleeds, that grows quickly, that is bigger than a half a centimeter diameter — those all need to be shown to a physician," Wild said.

It could appear on your leg, the bottom of your foot, under the fingernails.

That's why Bill Contaxis, 58, and his wife Pat, 59, who spend a lot of time at the beach in their native Milford and in favorite tropical vacation spots, go to a dermatologist for annual screenings.

"You should be checked," Contaxis said.

It's hard to convince people to do self checks or get professional screenings when they don't even heed warnings about the sun.

Why are people so complacent?

"It's hard to break old habits. Why do people still drink? Why do people still smoke?," Topham asked.

Not even scare tactics seem to work.

Topham had a male patient who lost 65 percent of his nose to the disease. "I've seen patients lose the globe of their eye because they got a skin cancer so close to the rim. I can think of people losing their lips," she said.

The latest tactic of medical professionals is to appeal to people's vanity.

"Skin aging is very much accelerated with more sun exposure," Wild said.

"I grew up on Fairfield beach and I used to wear baby oil with iodine with reflectors. Years ago when you looked tan you looked healthy," Topham said.

But there's nothing attractive about sun damage, she said.

"If they really think they look good with all these wrinkles and big, ugly brown spots, they really don't. They look old and weathered. They look like an old salt," Topham said.

Tanning of any kind is unhealthy, she said.

"Unfortunately, people think a tanning bed is much safer. They're full of baloney. It's equally damaging, if not more, because of the amount of time people go to those places... And we don't know the effects of these spray-on tans. I don't think going into a room and having these chemicals sprayed on you that you're inhaling is good for you," Topham added.

"You're better off staying out of the sun and staying out of tanning centers. If you do that it's kind of like giving up cigarettes. You can reduce your [cancer] risk," Weitzman said.