

## **Melanoma the Most Dangerous Skin Cancer (Written by: Dr. Shelley Sekula Gibbs)**

Lisa's family did not discuss the risk of skin cancer. They lived in Chicago and were unaware that skin cancer can strike anyone anywhere. Lisa moved to Houston and wanted to return to show off a beautiful Southern tan at her sister's wedding. As her job kept her indoors most of the time, she bought a membership in a tanning salon and went there daily or every other day. The manager of the salon assured her that the tanning beds were approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and that rays from an artificial light source were safer than the sun.

When she noticed a black spot on her upper arm, she decided it was no worse than a beauty mark on the face and did not need to be investigated. Two years went by, then during a physical examination a doctor noticed the dark growth, and recommended a biopsy to determine if the spot was safe. The diagnosis was an unwelcome, stunning surprise. The tan she believed was sexy had in truth damaged her skin. The dark spot was a melanoma, the most dangerous form of skin cancer, which has the potential for metastasizing (spreading) and causing death.

The melanoma was surgically removed and the treatment appears to have been successful, and Lisa is now married and the mother of two children. But the melanoma has changed her life; she worries that it could return at any time. Moreover, melanoma is considered a, "pre-existing condition" not covered under her medical insurance policy.

Lisa, like many others, has fallen victim to this very real and very dangerous skin cancer. Recent studies by the Skin Cancer Foundation have determined that, “melanoma is currently the sixth most common cancer overall in the United States.” Melanoma incidence rates are increasing, and the American Cancer Society predicts that over 8,000 people will perish from this disease. Melanoma can take many shapes and forms but the following is a good baseline guide for early detection.

The first thing you should do to assess your risk of developing melanoma is to analyze your risk factors. A family history of skin cancer, especially melanoma, will place you at higher risk. You can also look at your skin type and eye color to further assess your risk. Look to Goldilocks as an example for a high risk individual. Fair skin, fair hair, and light colored eyes elevate your risk. Melanoma can manifest itself in pre-existing moles or it can surface unexpectedly. Those with naturally darker complexions can contract melanoma, but the risk is not very high. Regardless, everyone should take preventative measures.

Self skin exams performed monthly will greatly reduce your risk of contracting melanoma as well as give you piece of mind. Familiarize yourself with your skin’s canvas, so that if a new spot appears or an old spot starts to grow or change colors you will be immediately aware of it. Check for the ABCDE’s of melanoma – A. Asymmetry, B. Border irregularity, C. Color, D. Diameter (Bigger than a pencil eraser) , and E. Evolving, a changing mole. Safer moles are those that are uniform in color, have smooth borders, symmetrical shapes, and are less than 5 mm in diameter. Melanoma can stray

from these principles, but most melanomas have one or more of the aforementioned standards.

The best way to prevent skin cancer is to cover up your skin when you are going to be exposed to significant amounts of sunlight. If you are fishing you should wear light colored long sleeves and pants, and a large brim hat. Men frequently get skin cancers on their ears and in their scalp because they do not properly cover their head. Your nose, ears, and lips are very vulnerable to the sun, and it is imperative that you apply sunscreen to them. Women's skin cancers are typically found on their legs, faces and chest. Many women protect their faces with makeup, but they forget to protect their legs, neck, chest, arms and hands.

Sunscreen is critical in preventing skin cancer. Apply it liberally, and apply it often, every two hours is a good rule of thumb. A good sunscreen will have at least SPF 15 or higher. For those of you with children, make sure to protect their skin. Melanoma can occur on anyone at any age. Studies have shown that the risk for acquiring skin cancer triples when a child has had prolonged exposure to the sun before the age of 18. Set a good example for your kids and get into the habit of keeping the sunscreen bottle next to the toothpaste to use every morning. Start a routine where you wash your face, brush your teeth, then put on sunscreen before you prepare for the day.

The second phase to hold skin cancers at bay is to be cautious and perform self skin examinations every month. If you observe your skin and see a mole or lesion growing

quickly, make sure to have it looked at by a professional. If your mole starts to change colors, or is irregular in shape you should go to your dermatologist. Most skin cancers if caught early are treatable and curable.

There is some good news in the fight to prevent skin cancer. More and more people are becoming better educated about what melanoma and other skin cancers look like, and they are going to their doctors for early treatment. There is vast information on the internet that people can go to for more information on melanoma and how to watch changing moles. Internet websites such as the Skin Cancer Foundation, Web M.D., the American Academy of Dermatology, and the American Cancer Society, all provide ample information about melanoma.

Finally, our ozone layer is replenishing itself. Scientists are predicting that within the next fifty years we will no longer have to worry about stratospheric holes that allow excessive amounts of dangerous ultraviolet light to travel through our atmosphere and strike the Earth. The ozone layer provides protection against UV light, but there will always be some UV rays that manage to penetrate the shield, and for this reason it is essential to wear a light sunscreen every day of SPF 15 or higher, and whenever possible to don a hat.

## References

The Melanoma Letter Volume 25 No. 1, 2007

The first two paragraphs of this article are taken from Dr. Shelley Sekula Gibbs article, "Tanning: Harsh Reality vs. Fiction" which was published in The Skin Cancer Foundation Journal Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Issue. Volume XXII, 2004 p.34