

## News Release

### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **Love the Skin You're In: Too Much Fun in the Summer Sun Increases Skin Cancer Risks**

As we try to beat summer's heat by wearing shorts rather than pants and swapping sneakers for sandals, we also expose ourselves to more sunlight and increase the risk of developing skin cancer.

Michelle Tarbox, M.D., an associate professor of dermatology for the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center (TTUHSC) School of Medicine, said there are hundreds of minor types of skin cancer, which an experienced dermatologist can help detect. To help our skin navigate the months of summer sunshine as safely as possible, she said it's important to examine the skin for indications of damage and to treat it accordingly.

"There are many variations of skin cancer, but the three big heavy hitters that we talk about most frequently are basal cell, squamous cell and melanoma," Tarbox said. "Those are the most common ones that we encounter and the ones that are the most likely for a patient to find on their own, [but] getting a dermatologist to check your skin is the best way to guarantee that we're doing the right thing for you."

Skin cancer screening conducted by a dermatologist may be the best option, but Tarbox said routinely self-checking one's skin also can uncover important warning signs. Either way, she added, it's important to have regular screenings and self-check exams because while skin cancer is the most common type of cancer in humans, it also can be relatively easy to treat successfully.

"If it's caught in its earliest stages, it's 100% treatable, and people can live a completely normal life with just a little scar," Tarbox explained. "If it's detected very late, especially certain types of skin cancer, it can be much more serious and may require chemotherapy or it [could] potentially claim the person's life."

When conducting a self-check, Tarbox recommends looking for any spot that appears to be changing because skin cancer tends to evolve more quickly than do normal spots or moles on the skin. If one notices a spot has changed its color or texture, or if the spot is sore to the touch, itches or won't heal, they should contact a medical professional.

People with the lightest skin phototypes and the greatest sun exposure generally have the greatest risk for skin cancer. However, Tarbox stressed, everyone is at risk of developing skin cancer, no matter how light or dark their skin phototype. Even patients with no skin pigmentation are susceptible.

"Anybody in that whole spectrum can make skin cancer," Tarbox said. "Skin pigmentation does have some protective effect, but certainly you can have skin cancer in patients of any skin type."

The parts of the body that see the most exposure to the sun (e.g., the arms, hands, face and neck) are the most common areas for skin cancer, but it can develop anywhere on the body. In fact, Tarbox said body areas that are rarely exposed such as the groin, feet and scalp can have some of the most dangerous types of skin cancer.

For example, melanoma is generally more threatening when it develops on the scalp because there is less skin depth on the head than there is on the arms. Tarbox said she has seen a significant number of patients who were referred by the person who styles their hair.

“Our stylists and barbers see scalps more often than any dermatologist does,” Tarbox pointed out. “Nine out of 10 times it's a benign spot, but for every single time we find a spot that is significant and needs treatment, that might be a life saved.”

The treatment for skin cancer depends on its stage and type. Some skin cancers, when detected early, can be treated with topical medicines. As they get more advanced, Tarbox said some type of surgery may be required to cut out the spot and a margin of normal skin around the edges. If the skin cancer has reached a more advanced stage, or if it is a more aggressive form of skin cancer, it might require a procedure known as wide local excision during which the surgeon removes a significant margin of normal skin and a sentinel lymph node, or the lymph node that the cancer is most likely to affect first. That procedure is usually performed under anesthesia.

As with many health-related issues, Tarbox said the best way to treat skin cancer is to reduce the chances of it developing. She recommends:

- Eating plenty of vegetables and fruits of various colors. The chemicals that make those pigments in plants are actually photo protective in many ways. In addition, their antioxidant capacity can help to neutralize some of the bad effects that we get from UV radiation.
- Protecting the skin from direct sunlight by wearing protective clothing (e.g., hats and long sleeves), seeking shade or applying sunscreen. The most effective sunscreens, whether in powder, lotion, gel or spray should offer good water resistance and an SPF of 30 or higher.
- For children, limiting outdoor activities to times of the day when the sun is less intense such as the morning hours or late in the afternoon, reapplying sunscreen as necessary when children exit the water and helping them become comfortable wearing protective clothing.
- Contacting a dermatologist any time a new spot or mole appears on the skin.

“June is for most people, including me, the perceived beginning of summer,” Tarbox said. “I think moving forward into the summertime with some sun smarts will probably help protect our skin down the road and help us have better skin health for the rest of our lives.”