

Detecting skin cancer

Years of worshipping the sun or overexposure to the sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays may have made you vulnerable to developing skin cancer.

Dermatologists recommend that you do periodic self-examinations for any changes in the number, size, shape, and color of pigmented areas of your skin, such as freckles and moles.

However, consulting a dermatologist may be the surest way

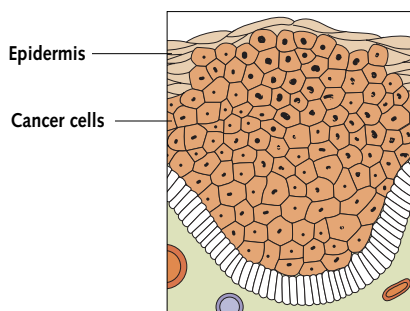
to detect skin cancer early, as underscored by researchers reporting in the February 17, 1999, issue of *JAMA*. They found that physicians are more likely to detect thinner melanomas, the most dangerous type of skin cancer, than patients who do self-examinations, increasing the likelihood that the skin cancer can be detected early enough to be treated effectively.

WHO'S AT RISK?

- Whites at greater risk than other groups
- People who have had excessive exposure to UV radiation from the sun without protection
- People with fair skin are at more than 20 times greater risk
- Men are 2 to 3 times more likely than women to have basal cell and squamous cell cancers
- People with a family history of skin cancer
- Workers exposed to arsenic, industrial tar, coal, paraffin, and certain types of heavy oils

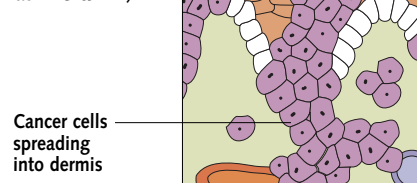
TYPES OF SKIN CANCER:

• **Basal cell carcinoma** – Small, fleshy bumps or lumps on the head, neck, and hands. Named for the lowest layer of the **epidermis** (top layer of skin) where the cancer originates. The most common skin cancer that rarely **metastasizes** (spreads) but can extend below the skin to the bone.



Basal cell carcinoma

• **Malignant melanoma** – Usually grows from an existing mole, which may enlarge, become lumpy, bleed, change color, develop a spreading black edge, turn into a scab, or begin to itch. The most aggressive type of skin cancer that causes the most deaths. Originates in the **melanocytes** (the cells that produce the skin coloring or pigment known as **melanin**).



Malignant melanoma

• **Squamous cell carcinoma** – Lumps of tissue or red, scaly patches usually found on the rim of the ear, the face, lips, and mouth. Originates in the higher levels of the epidermis. It's the second most common skin cancer, and unlike basal cell carcinoma, it can spread.

HOW TO DETECT SKIN CANCER:

Consult a dermatologist immediately if you have moles or pigmented spots with these characteristics (remember your

ABCDs):

- **A**symmetrical (one half is not identical to the other)
- **B**orders that are irregular, uneven, or ragged
- **C**olor varies from one area to another
- **D**iameter is larger than 6 mm (larger than a pencil eraser)

PREVENTION:

- Before going outdoors, apply sunscreen that protects against UVA and UVB rays and has a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15. Reapply sunscreen every 2 hours when outdoors, especially if swimming or sweating.
- Wear clothing that covers most parts of the body, a hat, and sunglasses when out in the sun.
- Stay in the shade whenever possible.
- Avoid exposure to the sun between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., when the sun's rays are the most intense.
- Don't use tanning beds.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- National Cancer Institute Cancer Information Service 800/4-CANCER 800/332-8615 (TTY) or www.nci.nih.gov
- American Academy of Dermatology 888/462-DERM or www.aad.org
- American Cancer Society 800/ACS-2345 or www.cancer.org

INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm.

Additional Sources: American Academy of Dermatology, American Cancer Society, National Cancer Institute, *AMA's Encyclopedia of Medicine*

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