

Skin Cancer Information

Australia is the skin cancer capital of the world. Prevention is best, but it is wise to consult a doctor with any suspicious spot and consider a regular skin check if high risk or in adulthood.

There are two main groupings of skin cancers. The one that we hear most about is Melanoma. The other group is non-melanocytic skin cancer (NMSC) and consists of Basal Cell Carcinoma (BCC) and Squamous Cell Carcinoma (SCC).

Melanoma accounts for 4% of all skin cancers but is responsible for 70% of the deaths. It is increasing in incidence and is 20 times more common than 60 years ago. More males are affected than females. In Australia, there are approximately 10,000 cases of melanoma per year with 1000 dying. There is a lifetime risk of 1 in 22 for men and 1 in 35 for women. If picked up early enough, 95% may be cured.

Melanoma is often very difficult to notice yourself. Nevertheless, look for a new spot or a change in an existing freckle or mole. The change may be in size, shape or colour and is noticed over weeks to months. Melanoma often has an irregular edge or surface. Nodular melanoma is the most aggressive form and can appear as a new small lump coloured black, brown, red or pink.

The commonest cause of skin cancer is exposure to ultraviolet radiation, especially the sun. Melanoma and BCC are thought to be associated with the number of significant sunburns as a child/teenager/young adult. SCC and its pre-cursors are thought to be related to the accumulative effect of a lifetime of UV exposure. Genetics also play a significant role in some people. Those with fair skin, red hair and multiple freckles/moles need to be especially careful.

Ultraviolet radiation can not be seen or felt (infrared generates heat). It causes sunburn, skin damage, premature aging and skin cancer. The peak period for UV radiation is between 10 and 2 (11-3 in daylight saving). Remember that UV radiation intensity increases with altitude, by 15% for every 1000 metres above sea level. It passes through clouds and it doesn't care what season it is. UV radiation is easily reflected, so sunscreen on the face should be used in addition to a hat.

One aims to prevent skin cancers. So, avoid sun exposure at peak UV radiation if possible. Wear protective clothing and seek shade. Apply sunscreen daily. Wear Australian standard sunglasses and a broad brim hat. Can do self examination utilising a hand held mirror and assistant. Consult a doctor at the first sign of a suspicious lesion (changed, looks different to others, new- especially as one becomes older). Skin cancers often look harmless. If detected early, 99% can be cured.

Sunscreen filters most, not all, UV radiation. If one irritates, try another. Some are greasier than others. Hamilton's (Australian owned) makes a variety of excellent products. Hamilton's Optimal prevents some of the immune related effects on the skin as well as the radiation. Use it all year round. Use half a teaspoon on the face with a total of 30ml (6 teaspoons) to cover an average adult. Apply 20minutes before going out and reapply every 3-4 hours depending upon conditions (sweat, water). Smear it on without rubbing it right in. One needs a SPF (sun protection factor) of 30+. Hopefully, getting kids into good habits now will reduce skin cancer in the future.

A thorough skin examination by a doctor takes up to 15minutes. You will be asked to remove all clothing except your undergarments. It is important to inspect your face, neck, legs, arms, trunk, fingers, toes and the skin on the palms of your hands and the soles of your feet. It is best not to wear makeup, fake tan or nail polish.

Dr Luke Bookallil treats skin cancers and is available for consultation at 211 Rusden St, Armidale 2350. Phone 6772 2291.