

10 Skin Cancer Myths Debunked

1. I am not at risk to get skin cancer, because my routine (work, drive to work, indoor hobbies, and vacations) doesn't include any outdoor activities.

False. Dermatologists find that brief sun exposures throughout the year can add up to significant damage for people with fair skin. These brief moments can include driving with the sunroof open or walking around outdoor shopping centers during peak sun hours - between 10am and 4pm - which exposes your skin to damaging UV rays.ⁱ These cumulative, everyday exposures are linked to squamous cell cancer. Though not as dangerous as melanoma, squamous cell cancer is believed to cause up to 20% of skin cancer deaths.ⁱⁱ

2. A tanning bed is safer than UV rays from the sun

False. Exposure to the ultraviolet light from tanning beds can impact the skin in a variety of ways – including wrinkles, sun spots or freckles. And, for one in every five Americans, this exposure can lead to skin cancer.

The use of tanning beds and sun lamps is hazardous because the UV radiation they deliver can damage your skin. Dermatologists highly recommend not using tanning beds and sun lamps. There is growing evidence that they may increase your risk of developing melanoma, so these methods of tanning are an area of active research.ⁱⁱⁱ If you are seeking a tanned appearance, consider sunless tanning products.

3. People who tan easily and rarely burn will not get cancer.

False. There is no such thing as a healthy suntan. Any change in your natural skin color is a sign of skin damage. Evidence suggests tanning greatly increases your risk of developing skin cancer. The increase in skin pigment, called melanin, which causes your skin to tan is a sign of damage. Once skin is exposed to UV radiation, it increases the production of melanin in an attempt to protect the skin from further damage. The increase in melanin may cause your skin tone to darken over the next 48 hours.^{iv} Every time your skin color changes after sun exposure, your risk of developing sun-related ailments increases.^v The sun's rays, which are called ultraviolet A and ultraviolet B rays (UVA and UVB rays) damage your skin. This leads to early wrinkles, cataracts, skin cancer and other skin problems. Being in the sun often, over time, even if you don't burn, can lead to skin cancer.^{vi}

4. Dark-skinned men and women are not at risk for sun damage and skin cancer

False. Though naturally-dark people have a much lower risk of skin cancer than fair-toned people, this does not make them immune to skin cancer. Darker skinned men and women should still take action to protect their skin and eyes from overexposure to the sun as they can still develop malignancies and suffer all forms of UV damage.^{vii} In addition, cases of skin cancer in people with darker skin are often not detected until later stages, when it is more dangerous.^{viii}

People of all skin tones and races are at risk for skin cancer. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in 2005, 50,589 whites, 1,122 Hispanics, 261

blacks, 159 Asian/Pacific Islanders, and 95 American Indians/Alaska Natives in the United States were diagnosed with melanomas (the deadliest form of skin cancer) of the skin^{ix}.

5. If you have a funny looking or suspicious mole, your doctor can always cut it off before it turns cancerous.

False. Sometimes what people may perceive as an annoying sore that won't go away, or a mole that has changed in size or color, is really something more serious and possibly an early form of skin cancer. Since only a physician can determine whether an area of the skin is cancerous, a visit to a dermatologic surgeon should be scheduled if any abnormal moles are discovered. An annual skin cancer screening is necessary to identify cancer in its early stages. The five year survival rate for people whose melanoma is detected and treated before it spreads is almost 100 percent.^x

6. You don't need to wear sunscreen on a cloudy day

False. It is a common myth that you can't get sunburned on a cloudy day; this is simply not the case. Even under cloud cover it is possible for the sun to harm your skin and eyes, and cause long-term damage. It is important that you protect yourself with sunscreen, even in cloudy weather.^{xi}

7. An SPF 30 is the all SPF protection you need anything higher is all the same.

False. Here are 3 key points that debunk this common myth. (1) If you do not apply enough sunscreen (1 oz for your body and 1 tablespoon for your face) or you apply your sunscreen incorrectly, it may result in a lower SPF than the labeled protection level. For instance, if you under apply your SPF 30 sunscreen by half, you may only get the protection level of an SPF 15 or lower. In this case, higher SPF sunscreens can help compensate for the fact that people usually do not apply enough. There is also recent evidence that shows higher SPFs provide increased protection. A double-blind, randomized clinical study funded in part by Neutrogena found SPF 85 sunscreen to be "significantly more protective" than SPF 50. (2) Higher SPF sunscreens also provide additional sunburn protection under extreme UV conditions. When you participate in moderate outdoor activities like jogging or are outside on a very hot day, the heat from your activity and surroundings can increase the sensitivity of your skin and higher SPF protection is needed in order to prevent acute sunburn. (3) Finally, UV damage accumulates over your lifetime. Using a high SPF sunscreens can reduce the accumulation of chronic UV damage which is linked to non-melanoma skin cancer and aging.

High SPF sunscreens used to be known as thick, greasy and whitening but today's high SPF sunscreens have greatly improved and are even offered in spray forms so there is really no excuse to not to give yourself the added protection. Because the protection afforded by sunscreen begins to wear off after lengthy exposure to the sun and sunscreen rubs off with normal activity, it needs to be reapplied at least every two hours no matter what SPF level you are using.

8. Teenagers and young people don't have to worry about skin cancer. It only affects older adults

False. Melanoma is the most common form of cancer in young adults, ages 25-29. It also increasing faster in women ages 15-29 than in men in the same age group.^{xii} You should check your skin monthly, and be alert to changes in the number, size, shape, or color of spots on your skin or sores that do not heal. Pay special attention to moles, especially moles that has recently changed, bleeds, or itches.

9. Only UVB radiation can cause skin damage.

False. Both UV-A and UV-B cause sunburns and damaging effects such as skin cancer. Look for a sunscreen that provides protection from both, or is broad-spectrum.

10. I ski, snowboard and am outside a lot, but I don't need to wear sunscreen because it's winter.

False. While it is true that the sun's intensity is lower during the winter, snow reflects the damaging rays of the sun, which can increase your chance of a sunburn or damage to your skin.^{xiii}

ⁱ American Cancer Society. Sun Safety 101.

http://www.cancer.org/docroot/SPC/content/SPC_1_Sun_Safety_101.asp

ⁱⁱ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. Counseling to Prevent Skin Cancer. <http://www.ahrq.gov/clinic/3rduspstf/skacacoun/skcarr.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Indoor Tanning: The Risks of Ultraviolet Rays. <http://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm186687.htm>

^{iv} U.S. Food and Drug Administration. The Risks of Tanning. <http://www.fda.gov/Radiation-EmittingProducts/RadiationEmittingProductsandProcedures/Tanning/ucm116432.htm>

^v Environmental Protection Agency. Sunscreen: The Burning Facts. <http://www.epa.gov/sunwise/doc/sunscreen.pdf>.

^{vi} Erie County, New York Department of Health. Is a Suntan Worth Your Life? <http://www.erie.gov/health/pdfs/suntan.pdf>

^{vii} U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Your Skin. <http://www.fda.gov/Radiation-EmittingProducts/RadiationEmittingProductsandProcedures/Tanning/ucm116428.htm>

^{viii} Environmental Protection Agency. Sunscreen: The Burning Facts. <http://www.epa.gov/sunwise/doc/sunscreen.pdf>.

^{ix} U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. United States Cancer Statistics: 1999–2006 Incidence and Mortality Web-based Report. <http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/uscs/cancersbyraceandethnicity.aspx>.

^x American Cancer Society. Skin Cancer Facts.

http://www.cancer.org/docroot/PED/content/ped_7_1_What_You_Need_To_Know_About_Skin_Cancer.asp?sitearea=&level=

^{xi} U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Ultraviolet (UV) Radiation. <http://www.fda.gov/Radiation-EmittingProducts/RadiationEmittingProductsandProcedures/Tanning/ucm116425.htm>

^{xii} Cancer Epidemiology in Older Adolescents & Young Adults. SEER AYA Monograph Pages 53-63. 2007.

^{xiii} U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Sun Protection. <http://www.fda.gov/Radiation-EmittingProducts/RadiationEmittingProductsandProcedures/Tanning/ucm116445.htm>