



The No. 1 boomer cancer

Skin cancer: recognize it, prevent it

— BY MICHAEL ARMSTRONG JR., M.D. —

THE FREQUENCY OF SKIN CANCER IN THE UNITED STATES IS DOUBLING EVERY 10-20 YEARS.

There will be over one million cases of skin cancer this year – almost as many as all other cancer types combined. Boomers are at the greatest risk of developing skin cancer, having grown up with the luxury of summer vacations and a belief that a dark tan is a sign of good health. Do you remember choosing between SPF 2 and SPF 4? Once you had a good base tan, did you abandon “dark tanning oil” for plain baby oil? Have you ever had a bad sunburn? Have you ever used a tanning bed or sunlamp? If you are over 40 and can answer “yes” to any of these questions, you may be at risk for skin cancer.

SKIN CANCER CAN OCCUR SOONER THAN YOU THINK.

Almost half of my patients are younger than 65 and six percent are younger than 45. Many of these patients have disfiguring cancers involving the nose or other sensitive areas of the face.

The best way to identify skin cancer is to perform a regular


skin self examination. After you shower or bathe, examine your skin in a well-lighted room. Use a mirror to examine less visible places. Become familiar with the normal moles, birth marks and other spots on your skin. Take photographs and make a note of what’s normal for you, but watch for the following changes:

WARNING SIGNS OF CANCER:

1. A NEW GROWTH OR MOLE.
2. GROWTH OR CHANGE IN AN EXISTING MOLE.
3. CRUSTING, BLEEDING OR ULCERATION.
4. FAILURE TO HEAL WITHIN 2-4 WEEKS.
5. IRREGULAR COLOR WITHIN A LESION.
6. IRREGULAR BORDERS WITHIN A LESION.
7. ANY LESION LARGER THAN A PENCIL ERASER.

Although your **primary care physician** will inspect your skin as part of an annual health maintenance examination, you should point out any new, enlarging or changing moles. Patients with a prior history of skin cancer have a fifty percent chance of discovering another skin cancer within three years. You may be referred to a specialist, such as a dermatologist (skin doctor) or a plastic surgeon. If there is any doubt, a small biopsy can be performed easily in the office under local anesthesia.

SKIN CANCER IS LARGELY PREVENTABLE BY MINIMIZING SUN EXPOSURE.

The risk of skin cancer is directly related to your exposure of ultraviolet radiation. Ultraviolet radiation comes from the sun as well as from sunlamps and tanning beds. Other predisposing factors include fair skin or a family history of skin cancer. Certain medical conditions, including genetic disorders, immune system disorders, infection with human papilloma virus, existing prior scars or burns, chronic inflammation with ulcers and exposure to arsenic can also increase the risk of skin cancer. Be aware that ultraviolet radiation is reflected by sand, water, snow and ice. Ultraviolet radiation penetrates windows, clouds and light clothing. 

Dr. Michael Armstrong is a nasal and sinus specialist in Richmond, as well as a board-certified facial plastic surgeon specializing in rhinoplasty.

BE SKIN SMART

TO REDUCE YOUR RISK OF SKIN CANCER IT IS BEST TO REDUCE YOUR LIFETIME EXPOSURE TO ULTRAVIOLET LIGHT:

1. Stay out of the sun from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. (daylight saving time).
2. Wear long sleeves, long pants, a wide brim hat and sunglasses that absorb ultraviolet.
3. Use a broad spectrum sunscreen (UVA and UVB) with a sun protection factor (SPF) of 15 or greater.
4. Never use sunlamps or tanning booths. Obtaining a "base tan" to prevent sunburn only adds to your cumulative lifetime sun damage.



Identifying different types of skin cancers



[basal cell cancers on the ear and cheek]

Basal cell cancer accounts for 75% of all skin cancers. They are typically nodular, translucent and pearly, but can be flat, very subtle and scar-like. They do not spread to other parts of the body but can be locally destructive.



[Squamous cell cancers on the scalp and lip]

Squamous cell cancers account for about 20% of all skin cancers. They grow much faster than basal cell cancers and may metastasize (spread) to lymph nodes and distant parts of the body. There is a 2% risk of death from squamous cell cancers.



[malignant melanomas on the cheek and neck]

Malignant melanoma is the most dangerous of the common skin cancers, and accounts for 1-2% of all cancer deaths in the United States. Melanomas are characterized by tumors of varying color with irregular borders. Thick, deep or ulcerating melanomas are prone to early metastases and can spread to the lungs, liver and brain.