

Skin cancer

Darn it all!! Once again, I'm benched by my dermatologist. No running, swimming or biking for two weeks. Bleh!

For the fifth time in two years, a squamous cell skin cancer has claimed a big chunk of my body. Two ugly scars on my right forearm, two on my right shin and the latest, an angry incision healing on my right calf muscle.

It's a bummer for sure. But you know what's really sad? I deserve every one of those scars.

Through high school and college, I worked summers as a lifeguard, arriving at work early so I could "lay out" in the sun before baking myself for eight more hours keeping watch over a huge municipal pool reflecting back on me.

To get a jump-start on my tan, I'd fry myself over spring break while visiting my Grandmother in Phoenix and schedule my college spring semester classes so I could sizzle a little more under the midday sun in the courtyard of my dorm.

Determined to be bronze for a winter frat party, I once sat in front of a sunlamp, exposing myself to three times the ultraviolet light recommended (because, stupidly, I couldn't "feel" anything!) and landed in the ER with second degree burns several hours later!

FELONY stupid!

Now, all the sunscreen in the world can't stop the self-inflicted damage to my once-smooth skin.

My dermatologist, Dr. Susan Stuart of La Jolla Dermatology, says she sees plenty of former sun worshippers. The sad truth is there's no turning back. "Once you've had a cancerous lesion," explains Dr. Stuart, "your chance of having more increases. Damage to the DNA in skin cells from ultraviolet exposure has reached a threshold which promotes the transformation to cancerous cells."

Not very encouraging news for all of us from the baby oil, iodine and reflector generation. But this doesn't have to be your story. The key is prevention!

When used properly, today's sunscreens are entirely effective. Dr. Stuart recommends choosing one that is broad spectrum (covering UVA and UVB) with an SPF of 30 or higher. "Reapply every two hours if in the sun," says Dr. Stuart. "For sensitive skin, choose one labeled for babies."

Those with fair skin who sunburn easily are at highest risk to develop skin cancer. Other risk factors include family history, having more than twenty-five moles and smoking.

“The effect of the sun is cumulative,” says Dr. Stuart. “So every walk to and from the car and mailbox add up. Even light clothing and car windows allow UV to reach the skin.”

So, how do you know when that “thing” on your arm needs to be looked at by a doctor? Basically, if it’s a new or changing lesion or a mole that looks different from the others, get it checked. According to Dr. Stuart, that “thing” on your face that looks like a pimple, but doesn’t go away... could be a basal cell carcinoma.

Then, be on the lookout for the deadliest form of skin cancer--malignant melanoma. (Check box for the ABCDE’s of melanoma) Early detection is crucial because it can spread to the lymph nodes and other organs...resulting in death.

Still not motivated to apply that sunscreen? I’ll be happy to show you my scars.
