

## **DOCTOR TO PATIENT: How to check yourself for signs of skin cancer**

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Make sure this summer is a great one for you and your family by being prepared on how to treat and prevent some of the season's health hazards.

Dr. Sami Abbasi, a board-certified dermatologist, responds to questions about summer skin safety and how to check yourself for signs of skin cancer.



**Q:** When it comes to summer and skin care, what is the first line of defense?

**A:** Sun protection — this entails more than just sunscreen usage. Avoiding the sun during the hottest hours of the day, usually between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., can help prevent damage to our skin.

Wearing protective clothing such as a hat is also recommended. If your shadow is shorter than you are, look for shade.

**Q:** How much sunscreen do I need to use?

**A:** One ounce, the size of a shot glass, is usually enough to cover the most commonly exposed areas of the body, such as the face, ears, neck, arms and scalp, if necessary.

**Q:** What is the right way to apply sunscreen?

**A:** Apply to dry skin at least 15 minutes before going outdoors. Lips can be protected with a lip balm containing sunscreen. Remember to reapply sunscreen every two to three hours or after swimming or sweating heavily.

There are a few mistakes people commonly make when it comes to sunscreen. Some forget to apply sunscreen until they have already been outside for a while. Others forget that ultraviolet rays that can cause sunburn can pass through clouds or reflect off snow or sand.

Women sometimes mistakenly believe that the sunscreen in their makeup will protect them all day.

**Q:** Does a tan protect you from getting sunburned?

**A:** A tan can help prevent a sunburn, but at a price. It indicates sun damage has already occurred.

Tanned skin has a higher likelihood of developing skin cancer.

Q: What are some of the reasons some people tan and others burn?

A: Different people produce different amounts of melanin, which gives our skin its color. The skin produces more melanin to protect our DNA from damage. If you overwhelm the skin's ability to protect it, you'll burn.

Q: What is the best sunscreen to use on children?

A: Children less than 6 months old should avoid direct sun exposure. All others should use products containing zinc oxide or titanium dioxide, which have been found to be safe and unlikely to irritate the skin. Look for a sun protection factor, or SPF, of at least 30.

Make sure the label says "broad spectrum," which means it will help block UVA and UVB light.

Spray-on sunscreens are often the easiest for children.

Q: How often should sunscreen be applied?

A: Remember to reapply sunscreen every two to three hours or after swimming or sweating heavily.

Q: Will sunscreen prevent my child from getting much-needed vitamin D from the sun?

A: With over 1 million new cases of skin cancer diagnosed annually in the United States, we need to be as careful as possible when it comes to the sun.

Although sunscreen can decrease the skin's production of vitamin D, a healthy diet and vitamin supplements are safer. Even limited sun exposure helps with vitamin D production and may be sufficient.

Q: What's the best way to soothe sunburn?

A: Minor burns can be treated with cool baths as well as over-the-counter hydrocortisone cream and anti-inflammatories. More severe burns, which often blister, can be dangerous. Avoid popping blisters and seek medical attention if fever or headaches develop.

Q: What dangers (if any) are there to indoor UV tanning?

A: In addition to increasing the risk of skin cancers by damaging our DNA, tanning also can cause wrinkles, older-looking skin, age spots and even eye damage, including cataracts.

Q: What are signs of possible skin cancer?

A: At least one in five Americans will develop skin cancer during his or her lifetime. Basal cell carcinoma, the most common type, usually looks like a pearly or waxy bump that may scab or bleed. Squamous cell carcinomas tend to be more scaly or crusty. Melanomas are typically black or have multiple colors within the same mole.

Q: What areas should be checked for possible skin cancer?

A: Sun-exposed surfaces have the highest risk of developing skin cancers, but we can develop them anywhere, even in areas normally covered by clothes.

Q: What are the most common skin cancers and how are they treated?

A: Basal cell carcinoma accounts for the vast majority of skin cancers in America.

Both basal and squamous cell carcinomas are often treated with surgery.

Other less-aggressive treatments are sometimes sufficient, including scraping, freezing or radiating the lesions. Creams are occasionally effective, as well.

Melanomas are more dangerous cancers, which can spread easily and therefore need more aggressive treatment. Surgery almost always is the best option.

Melanoma also tends to run in families. Make sure your dermatologist is aware if any close relatives have been diagnosed with melanoma.

To determine if an unusual mole is actually melanoma or any other skin cancer, you can follow the A-B-C-D-E guideline developed by the American Academy of Dermatology:

A is for asymmetrical shape. Look for moles with irregular shapes.

B is for irregular border, meaning that the mole has indentations and cauliflower-like borders.

C is for changes in color — if the mole is more than one color or is uneven in its shading.

D is for diameter. Look for new growth in a mole larger than about 1/4 of an inch — think a pencil eraser.

E is for evolving. Look for changes over time, such as moles that grow or that change color or shape, or if they itch or bleed.

Q: Is it true that if you're dark-skinned, skin cancer is far less common — and far more likely to be fatal?

A: Dark skin resists damage from the sun, making basal and squamous cell cancers less common.

However, if a melanoma develops, it is more likely to be fatal in people with dark skin due to its tendency to appear in more unusual locations (such as the feet) accompanied by a potential delay in detection.

Q: Some insects and plants can be harmful during the summer — what is the best way to treat poison ivy or poison oak?

A: If you've ever had a run-in with poison ivy or oak while exploring the outdoors, you know it's no picnic.

These allergic rashes occur following contact with moist plant oils found on leaves.

If you do not wash the oils off your skin immediately, an itchy rash will likely develop and may blister.

Try using cool compresses, oatmeal baths and over-the-counter oral antihistamines or hydrocortisone creams for relief.

For more severe cases where significant discomfort results, a doctor should be consulted, and if you experience difficulty breathing or facial swelling, go to the nearest emergency room immediately.

Q: What is the best way to treat mosquito bites and bee stings?

A: Avoiding being bitten is your first line of defense. Insect repellants containing DEET have been shown to be more effective than most other products. Since many bites occur on the ankles and feet, wearing long pants and socks may help. Once bitten, hydrocortisone cream may help, but ultimately time is the only cure.

If stung by a bee, immediately remove the stinger from the skin by scraping it off horizontally with a fingernail or credit card. Apply ice and monitor for any difficulty breathing or weakness, which may be signs of shock. These symptoms may require immediate medical attention.

Epinephrine pens should be carried and used by people who have a history of allergic reactions to bee stings.

Q: When it comes to heat rash, what is the best way to treat it?

A: To beat the bumps and itch of heat rash, avoid situations that can lead to excessive sweating, such as hot, humid environments and strenuous physical activity.

Heat rash develops when sweat ducts become blocked and may be very itchy. It will clear up on its own, but cooling the skin and preventing further sweating can help resolve the problem more quickly.

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